Unpacking the Social Norms and Power Dynamics that Perpetuate the Exclusion of Women in Leadership and Socio-Economic Development in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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Abstract
Leaders are individuals who help to define the aims and goals of groups and organisations and then help to channel the energy of the group or organisation members to achieve those stated aims. Women in Nigeria constitutes a large number of the population, so the exclusion of women in elective and appointment positions and socio-economic development is a significant challenge in Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, this issue is deeply rooted in political, religious, cultural, social and economic factors, despite Nigeria's commitment to 35% affirmative action, women in Ebonyi State remain significantly underrepresented in elective and leadership positions and so this impacts negatively on overall socioeconomic development. This paper explores how the power dynamics intersect with the factors present in the society, revealing the web of social structures and power relations that maintain gender-based exclusion, information will be gathered through secondary sources. The theoretical framework that will be used is participatory theory. This highlighted the imperative of the study and the context specific interventions that challenge and transform these norms and dynamics, thereby promoting gender inclusivity in governance and bringing forth equitable socio-economic development.

Keywords: Development, Ebonyi State, Exclusion, Leadership, Women

Introduction

The affinity between women and socio-economic development is based on the realisation that no country can develop with half of its productive population relegated to the background, as there is no doubt that women's participation in politics can bring about political and socio-economic development, as research shows that investing in women's education, health, and economic opportunities can have positive impact on their socio-economic status and increase their participation in leadership roles (Iloka and Ojukwu, 2021). Globally, women play important roles such as mothers, producers, home managers, and community organisers as well as socio-cultural and political activists (Iloka and Ojukwu, 2021). Scandinavian countries have above-average female representation in

parliament, with the average in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark cited at 41.2%. The rest of Europe and America have a strong patriarchal tradition, however, with female representation rates in teens and twenties. In Asia, Women represent 11.4% of the Indian parliament and 23.4% of the Chinese parliament, while several countries do not have any female representatives (Comstock, 2022). Rwanda serves as an illustration of how women in leadership positions may impact growth and productivity in the political arena. With more than 60% of the seats in the parliament, Rwanda has the greatest proportion of female representation in any parliament in the world (Lavanya, 2024). Yet, women are sidelined and, most of the time, relegated to the background in terms of politics despite the affirmative action of 35% of women in Nigeria (Jacob, Nwigwe, and Ikedinma, 2023). The exclusion of women from leadership and socio-economic development in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, persists due to entrenched social norms and power dynamics, it is a complex issue deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and economic contexts. Despite global efforts to promote gender equality, women in Ebonyi State continue to face significant barriers to participation and empowerment (United Nations- UN Women, 2022). This study aims to unpack these complex factors, exploring the intersections of patriarchy, culture, and socio-economic structures that limit women's potential. Historically, women's leadership roles have been undermined by patriarchal structures that prioritize male authority (Egwu J, 2020). Cultural beliefs further entrench gender roles that confine women to domestic spheres while discouraging their participation in public life. Economic barriers also play a significant role; limited access to resources and opportunities stifles women's empowerment and hinders their ability to contribute meaningfully to socio-economic development. Additionally, political representation remains disproportionately low for women in Ebonyi State, exacerbating the challenges they face in influencing governance and policy-making processes (Akande, 2023). Education serves as both a tool for empowerment and a battleground for gender inequality; disparities in educational access continue to limit women's potential. Ebonyi State, located in southeastern Nigeria, is characterised by deep-rooted patriarchal norms and cultural practices that reinforce gender inequality (Nwagbara, 2020). Women's exclusion from decision-making processes, economic opportunities, and leadership positions perpetuates poverty, inequality, and social injustice (Adelakun, 2020).

Social norms, shaped by cultural, religious, and traditional beliefs, dictate women's roles and expectations, limiting their aspirations and opportunities (Oyekanmi, 2022), the examination of social norms affecting women's leadership roles reveals a stark reality shaped by traditional gender expectations in Ebonyi State. Women are often relegated to domestic roles, primarily seen as caretakers and home managers, which significantly limits their aspirations for leadership positions. Cultural beliefs, such as the notion that men are the primary breadwinners and decision-makers, perpetuate the idea that women's contributions are secondary. This cultural conditioning is further reinforced through various societal mechanisms, including family structures and religious teachings, which often give priorities to male dominance. For instance, a case study of female local government councilors in Ebonyi highlights how women face societal pressure to conform to traditional roles, leading to internalised beliefs that diminish their confidence in pursuing leadership opportunities. (Egwu, 2021).

Power dynamics, influenced by patriarchy and social networks, reinforce women's marginalisation (Afolabi, 2021), community gatherings and local customs frequently celebrate male achievements, overshadowing the accomplishments of women and reinforcing the status quo. Consequently, these social norms not only limit women's aspirations but also discourage them from seeking roles in leadership, thereby perpetuating their exclusion. The analysis of power dynamics within leadership structures in Ebonyi State unveils significant barriers that women face in accessing leadership positions. The existing hierarchies are predominantly male-dominated, with established networks that favor men's participation and influence, as during the All-Progressive Congress party's primaries in June, 2022, the only female aspirant Mrs. Uju Ohanenye stepped down before the voting started to support Mr. Bola Tinubu (Oyeleke, 2022). These networks often operate through informal channels, such as local political gatherings and business associations, which women may find challenging to penetrate due to societal expectations and restrictions on their mobility. The lack of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities further exacerbates this exclusion, as women often have limited access to influential figures who can champion their cause. A telling example can be observed in the political landscape where, despite the constitutional provisions for gender equality, women

remain underrepresented in key decision-making roles. The reluctance of male leaders to include women in leadership positions can be attributed to a desire to maintain power and control, thereby perpetuating a cycle of exclusion. As a result, the power dynamics in leadership structures not only hinder women's advancement but also reinforce a culture where male leadership is seen as the norm, further entrenching gender disparities. This research paper aims to answer the following questions:

- What social norms and cultural practices perpetuate women's exclusion from leadership in Ebonyi State?
- How do power dynamics, including patriarchy and social networks, reinforce women's marginalisation?
- What strategies can be employed to challenge and transform these social norms and power dynamics, to promote gender equality and inclusive socio-economic development?

The paper is significant, as the complex factors driving women's exclusion will be understood and it will inform policy and interventions promoting gender equality, as well as empower women to challenge and transform social norms.

Literature and conceptual review

Literature on gender inequality in leadership roles and socio-economic development in Nigeria reveals that entrenched socio-cultural perceptions and norms continue to disenfranchise women. Scholars like Dewi (2022), are of the view that women are worth more than whom they are expected to be and they have a high chance of politics if given an opportunity, by seeking to uncover the political role of women leaders. Enyiukwu (2020) argues that socio-cultural norms in Nigeria have systematically marginalised women, and disallowed their access into both political leadership and socio-economic opportunities (Enyiukwu, 2020). In addition, the gendered perception of roles in society is evident in the leadership and economic activities, and they are largely viewed to favor men. Olonade (2021) insist that there is need to come to a common understanding of the gendered perception of roles,

to ensure sustainable development in Nigeria where women barely account for 11% of participation in the nation's economy (Olonade, 2021), the dominance of a powerful class of male political elite that has historically run the political system has undermined women's political participation and reduced their chances of nomination for positions at the party level (Olomola, 2023). This paper will use existing literature to explore the particular power and cultural dynamics in Ebonyi State that perpetuates the marginalisation of women, which serves as a foundation of developing strategies for moving forward. One of the key factors contributing to the exclusion of women in leadership and development in Ebonyi State is the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that dictate gender roles and expectations. Women are often expected to prioritise their roles as wives and mothers above their ambitions for education and career advancement (Oyekanmi, 2022). This limits their opportunities for leadership and economic empowerment, as they are often sidelined in decision-making processes and denied access to resources and opportunities.

The historical context of women in leadership within Ebonyi State, Nigeria, reveals a complex interplay of traditional roles and contemporary challenges that continue to shape their participation in governance. Historically, women in pre-colonial Nigeria held significant positions of authority and influence, contributing to societal decision-making processes. Starting from the 1954 elections, the women remained underrepresented in both elective and appointive positions. At independence in 1960, the trend continued as the nationalists struggled to undo the damages of colonialism (Jacob, 2023). It is regrettable to note, that, while the women played significant roles in the decolonization and nation-building process, however, their rights for equal representation were systemically undermined in a supposedly secular country where equality should be a fundamental principle shaping the society. Politically, Nigerian society prior to colonialism was designed to accommodate male and female with each respecting the other, thereby creating harmony in the society. In that era, women owned lands, slaves and were sufficiently involved in governance through the age-grade system, village socio-cultural groups and family unions known as umunna or umuada. It was this sense of equality between men and women in the pre-colonial days that gave impetus to the Aba Women riot of 1929 (Enyioko,

2021). This riot was a protest from women against imposition of tax by the colonial masters. It was the female folks that organised and implemented the protest without recourse to the men. There were also instances where the women led warriors to victory such as Queen Hangbe of Benin kingdom. All these demonstrated equality in the Nigerian society before the European invasion, which suggests that women actually had equal opportunity to lead. Studies indicate that to a certain extent, women actively participated in the politics and processes of decolonisation, starting from the 1940s all through to the 1950s (Anigwe, 2014). Names like Hajia Gambo, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and Margaret Ekpo are revered in Nigeria for their courage and roles in the political and socio-economic movements that led to Nigeria's independence (Bakare, 2018). Their actions encouraged other women such as Senator Remi Tinubu, Late Prof. Dora Akunyeli and Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala to venture into politics after independence. Emama (2022) has unveiled the travails of the female gender, notably humiliation, manipulation, and marginalization through several culturally biased norms and practices which have culminated in systematic institutionalisation of male superiority over the female in all spheres of life- socio-culturally, economically and politically. Indeed, the life cycle of a woman from the cradle to the grave is said to be characterized by all manners of violent related manipulation and control of women by men through sex selection, abortion, different access to medical care, incest, and sexual harassment in the workplace, rape, marital rape, abuse of widows, etc. Our focus here, however, is to explore the process through which the Nigerian political space became predominantly a reserve for the male gender to the exclusion of their female counterparts and identify instances of Nigerian women who have been politically marginalised or otherwise.

However, the advent of colonialism marked a decline in women's status as patriarchal structures became more entrenched (Egwu N., Egwu, N., and Egwu, N., 2023). This transition has had lasting effects on the roles in society, often relegating them to domestic spheres while limiting their access to leadership opportunities. In recent years, there has been a notable emergence of contemporary female leaders who are challenging these historical constraints by striving for greater representation and involvement in political and community development initiatives. Despite these advancements, women in Ebonyi State continue to face numerous obstacles that hinder their full participation in leadership

roles. Cultural beliefs that prioritise male authority over female contributions persistently undermine women's efforts to ascend into positions of power (Ari, 2021). Similarly, inequalities have become a chronic social challenge confronting women in Nigeria, particularly in participation in leadership (Aro, 2022). Ari in 2021 espoused that, socio-cultural barriers highlight how entrenched beliefs about gender roles limit women's access to opportunities for political participation and community development. These barriers are compounded by power dynamics that favor male dominance within both formal institutions and informal networks, which is synonymous of this study. It is generally believed in Nigerian culture that politics is a dirty game, therefore any woman engaging in politics is seen as wayward and the stigma causes women to shy away from politics. On the other hand, Nigerian politics is structured in such a way that politicians must appear hard and fearful. This posture may work for the men but definitely not for the women who must conform to virtue of submissiveness, gentility and loyalty as constructed by the society. Virtually every woman in Nigeria is conscious of the opinions of the society, the majority of the women do not want to be seen from the negative point because public image is an important family treasure that must be protected at all costs.

Another issue is that politics in Nigeria has been monetised. In fact, it is usually referred to as "money bag" politics. Electoral periods therefore become a time to display wealth by contestants. Electorates are deceived into voting for the highest bidder(s) as they are not sure if they can benefit from the government when enthroned. The lack of enough financial resources and inadequate education are the basis of the socio-economic factors that hinder the political participation of the women. Women most times do not own resources, they are usually co-owners and such property lies in the hands of men (Agbalajobi, 2010). The few literates among women are usually unwilling to commit their meager financial resources to political activities since the likelihood of being supported by their political parties and male counterparts is often slim. There have been several efforts made by non-governmental organisations like the Gender and Development Action (GADA), Civil Liberties Organization, National Council of Women societies (NCWS), Women in Nigeria (WIN) among others to sensitize the women thereby increasing women's political literacy. This however has not really translated to a good number of women featuring in the mainstream

politics of their states (Agbalajobi, 2010). Also, female participation in the electoral process is limited by the high cost of party nomination fees put in place by the bigger and more popular parties in Nigeria. Women who may want to run for elective positions may not be economically strong to pay such fees then the implication is that most women who desire to contribute their quota towards the development of the nation are not likely to be elected into public offices due to their inability to pay nomination fees.

Also, the existing political god-fatherism, thuggery and gangsterism that characterise Nigerian political system may as well hinder women political participation. Political contests in Nigeria are also prone to violence and politicians have adopted a do-or-die-affair attitude, hence, seem not suitable for women- do or die simply means political violence, which many female politicians try to avoid, people see politics as an end in itself because of the economic gains through self-enrichment, hence would do everything possible to win by all means, this development makes political participation a difficult and risky venture for women (Eyinade, 2022). In the Nigerian landscape, there are rampant unresolved cases of political assassination. People see politics as an end in itself because of the economic gains through self-enrichment, hence would do everything possible to win, this development makes political participation a difficult and risky venture for women (Eyinade, 2022).

Women's economic engagement has many benefits, but there are drawbacks and trade-offs to take into account. The potential for a more egalitarian and sustainable economy is one of its main benefits. It has been demonstrated that gender diversity in leadership roles enhances business performance, and economies in nations with greater gender equality typically have greater economic stability. But there might be drawbacks as well. One issue is that when more women enter the job, they may have a "double burden" wherein they must balance taking care of their families and advancing their professions. In communities where conventional gender norms are still prominent, this can result in stress and burnout. The possibility that women may be forced into the labor due to financial need rather than choice, which might result in exploitation and unfavorable working circumstances, is another issue (Lavanya, 2024). For instance, women in the unorganized sector frequently put in long hours for little compensation in developing nations where they are not

guaranteed a job or have legal protection. Furthermore, despite the rise in women's economic engagement, occupational segregation and gender wage disparities still exist. Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions and high-paying industries, and women frequently make less money doing the same work as men. This suggests that even with the advancements made, there are still major obstacles in the way of attaining complete gender equality.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts participatory theory as its theoretical framework, which was propounded by Robert Chambers in 1983. The theory is associated with the vision or conceptual framework that attempts to bridge the subject-object distortion. The central proposition of this theory revolves around inclusion, equal partnership, transparency, sharing power and responsibilities, empowerment and cooperation.

Women exclusion in politics is a complex social and political issue, that can be explored utilising different theories depending on how the researcher conceptualised the phenomenon. In the words of Amartya, (2000) 'the idea of social exclusion has conceptual connections with well-established notions in the literature on poverty and deprivation, and has antecedents that are far older than the specific history of the terminology might suggest'. For instance, Nigeria's inequality gap has continued to widen and it is evident in the recent inequality index report wherein 'Nigeria scored 35.1% in the 2022 Gini coefficient, which ranks 11th in West Africa and 100th out of 163 countries globally. Nigeria's income inequality is 1 to 14 for the top 10% to the bottom 50% of the population and 1 to 37 for the top 1% to the bottom 50%' (Harmon, 2023).

It is on this basis therefore, that this study adopted participatory action research (PAR), a model of the participatory theory. PAR is a research methodology that involves active participation of stakeholders in the research process, aiming to empower marginalised groups and promote social change. It holds to the principles of participation, action, reflection and collaboration, that is, involving stakeholders in the research design, implementation, and decision-making; focusing on practical solutions and social change;

continuous reflection and learning and also researchers and stakeholders working together. PAR is aimed to address concerns with traditional research approaches:

1. Top-down approaches: Researcher-driven, neglecting local perspectives

2. Objectification: Treating participants as subjects rather than equals

3. Lack of context: Ignoring local context and power dynamics

The cycle of PAR is to plan: identifying research question and objectives, to act: implementing the research plan, to observe: collecting and analysing data and to reflect: interpret the findings and plan next steps. This study is anchored in the principles of participatory action research (PAR), a methodological approach centered on collaboration and reflection to tackle social challenges. PAR is especially effective in dissecting the intricate social norms and power relations that lead to the marginalisation of women in leadership roles and socio-economic activities in Ebonyi State. By engaging both researchers and participants in the joint creation of knowledge, this strategy aims to disrupt established power structures and foster social transformation. Community engagement is crucial in addressing gender inequalities, as demonstrated by various development projects in Ebonyi State (Ani et al., 2022).

The integration of PAR in this research seeks to empower local women, enabling them to share their experiences and collaborate on solutions to overcome obstacles in leadership and economic arenas. The benefits include; empowers women and marginalised groups, addresses power imbalances, fosters inclusive decision-making and promotes gender-sensitive policies.

Discussions

One of the key social norms that perpetuate the exclusion of women in leadership and socio-economic development in Ebonyi State is the belief that women should prioritise their roles as wives and mothers over pursuing careers or leadership positions. This expectation is reinforced by societal attitudes that devalue women's contributions outside the home and limit their opportunities for advancement. As a result, women are often

discouraged from pursuing education and professional opportunities that could enhance their socio-economic status.

Power dynamics in Ebonyi State are skewed in favor of men, who hold the majority of elective and appointed positions in government and civil society organisations. This lack of effective representation in decision-making processes marginalises women and limits their ability to influence policies and programs that affect their lives. Without equal participation in leadership roles, women are often left out of important discussions and decisions that shape their communities and hinder their ability to advocate for their own needs and interests. Women in Ebonyi State, face economic challenges that limit their ability to achieve financial independence and contribute to the development of their communities. Limited access to credit, land, and resources hinders women's ability to start businesses, access markets, and participate in the formal economy. This economic marginalisation perpetuates their exclusion from leadership positions, which gives birth to a cycle of poverty that negatively affects families and communities as a whole.

This paper showed that the prevailing social norms in Ebonyi State pose a major barrier to women's leadership and the socio-economic development of the State. The culture of leadership for women places so much emphasis on their domestic duties rather than their public leadership and developmental visibility. Research show that many women had accepted these norms and as a result, they did not see why they should be actively involved in

leadership positions. There is also the recognition that power in the community is predominantly exerted by men since most of the decisions affecting the community are taken by men (Enyiukwu, 2020). These are evidence of the fact that there is a need for a community-based approach to break these existing norms and to encourage women to become fully engaged in leadership and the economic development of the State.

The socio-economic implications of women's exclusion from leadership roles in Ebonyi State are profound and far-reaching. The economic disparities resulting from limited female participation in leadership roles contribute to a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment. Findings show that communities with greater representation of

women in leadership tend to experience enhanced economic growth and improved social outcomes. However, in Ebonyi State, the exclusion of women limits diverse perspectives that are essential for holistic community development. The absence of women in leadership positions means that their unique needs and priorities are often overlooked, leading to policies that fail to address critical issues such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Furthermore, the lack of female role models in leadership can perpetuate a belief among young girls that leadership is unattainable, thereby stifling a future generation's aspirations. To counteract these socio-economic disparities, it is therefore imperative that policy and programs that promote gender inclusivity in leadership and economic development should be implemented.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The development and empowerment of women in Ebonyi State is pivotal in changing the narrative regarding the gender bias and inequality in elective and appointed positions. The socio-cultural and historical backwardness on the perception of women especially in the rural areas is not an easy challenge, therefore, development initiatives have to be community based and tailor made to resonate with the people to make impactful change. Furthermore, the development initiatives have to be a long-term activity and not a one-off activity. Even though there have been dramatic shifts in social norms and perceptions, such development activities need to build on these shifts. It is essential to continue to advocate for women's rights and opportunities in order to achieve true gender equality and promote the development of Ebonyi State and Nigeria as a whole, as women's representation in political appointments and governance is low compared to men due to gender discrimination against women, sexism in favor of men as a result of cultural and religious factors.

Government at all levels in Nigeria, both traditional and secular leaders should pay close attention to the 35% affirmative action adopted globally to address the rising incidences of gender discrimination against women especially in developing countries. Inclusive governance policies will encourage more women to participate in politics and contribute in national development. Suffice it to note that political inclusiveness is vital to sustainable

democracy. In conclusion, the exclusion of women in leadership and socio-economic development in Ebonyi State is a complex issue that is rooted in social norms and power dynamics that privilege men and limit women's opportunities for empowerment. By challenging these norms and promoting gender equality, we can create a more inclusive and sustainable society that benefits all members of the community. Other factors that contribute are the inadequate resources available to women in a country where money politics thrived, lack of family and government support. The study concluded that there was low level of engagement and partnership between women's organisations and government which further hindered women's participation in governance and decision-making. When women are more economically empowered, there is a higher sense of social cohesiveness and community strength because gender equality is promoted and more women participate in decision making. Women who are powerful economically are more inclined to participate in their communities, assume leadership positions, and push for social change.

It is essential to challenge and change the social norms and power dynamics that perpetuate the exclusion of women in leadership and socio-economic development in Ebonyi State. This requires a multi-faceted approach that includes:

1. Promote gender equality and women's empowerment through legal reforms, policy interventions. There have to be involvement of local leaders and policymakers in developing laws that would support women empowerment to enable them participate fully in leadership positions. Democracy, as a system of government is considered effective if it is inclusive, which implies giving the people an equal opportunity, irrespective of their gender status to be part of the governance process and contribute their own quota to national development. Indeed, the participation of women in the political process of any country is an important step towards a balanced and equitable distribution of power. It leads to a new perspective and a diversity of contributions to policy making and to priorities of development.

2. For more women in Nigeria to effectively participate in politics, all the limiting factors such as electoral violence and fraud, money politics, and cultural issues must be addressed by establishing stronger and more inclusive political process to enable

citizens irrespective of their race, gender, social status, religious or political ideologies to participate in electoral processes. There has to be a concerted effort by government officials, civil society organisations, and faith-based organisations to support and encourage women's involvement in local governance and economic activities through mentorship, education and entrepreneurship, to break the leadership barriers created by the patriarchal society.

3. Development of a platform to encourage open discussion amongst community members, including men, about the existing socio-cultural structures, roles and expectations will promote restructuring of cultural beliefs and attitudes to be inclusive.

4. Formulation and implementing concerted education programs involving both men and women on the need for gender equality and why it is important for women to access leadership positions.

5. Nigerian women have achieved excellence in their various fields especially leadership, the paper therefore recommends that more women should be absorbed in the leadership of this country not only at the local government level but also at levels of the state and federal government. This will help to pull the various human resources which God has blessed the country with together for the upward growth and development of the entire country.

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