

## Gender Participation and Political Office Holding in Uyo Senatorial District: Implication for Rebuilding Trust in Political Education, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

*Political participation is a voluntary act which encompasses wide range of political activities including voting at election, contesting for political and party offices, attending political rallies, joining political parties among many others. Although political activities are considered to be "freezone" to all qualified citizens, certain factors have systematically over the years impeded female gender from actively participating in politics. Some of the identified factors were extensively discussed. Such factors include (1) patriarchy, (2) income level, (3) low level of education, (4) cultural and religious practices, (5) political violence among others. Liberal feminism and women's equality empowerment theories were used in explaining gender inequality. The paper adopted long essay approach and concluded that women have not been properly represented. The paper recommended among many others that political parties should create a support network for prospective aspirants by pairing women with men politicians who will be playing key roles and provide capacity building for young or aspiring female politicians to enhance and develop them ahead of subsequent elections. To create enabling environment that allows women to engage in decision making process in a sustainable and effective way that is free from violence and harassment of any kind. Girl education should be greatly encouraged.*

**Keywords:** Equality, Gender, Gender equality, Political participation and Political office holding

### **Introduction**

The concept of political participation is a development approach which recognizes the need to involve disadvantage segments of population in the design and implementation of policies concerning their wellbeing. Thus, political participation refers to the active involvement and engagement by individuals both women and men with political process that affect their lives. The act of active engagement includes: voting, standing for office, joining of political party or taking part in the decision making process through public debate, and dialogue with the representatives they elected or through public office at different levels of administrations-local, regional, national and international. Political participation is understood as a prerequisite for political development hence, by improving women's participation, political development may be enhanced and their quality of life improved.

Since the emergence of political independence in 1960, the Nigerian women have remained invisible in the political spheres. The 1985 Beijing declaration to which Nigeria is a signatory provides that 30% of all positions in government should be given to women. This policy is yet to be implemented in Nigeria because there is a continuing trend of male dominance in elective and appointive positions. Despite all efforts put in place, we are yet to

meet the 30% and 33% affirmation as contained in Beijing platform for action and National Gender Policy respectively. The participation of women in Nigeria politics is mostly limited to membership of women's wing of political parties, clapping, dancing and cooking for the men at political rallies and meetings (Akande, 2002). The principle of equality of men and women was recognized in the United Nations Charter (1945), and subsequently in the universal declaration of Human Right (1948). In spite of the international declarations affirming the rights and equality between men and women of which Nigeria is a signatory, available literature shows that women still constitute a disproportionately small percentage of those participating in political decision-making and leadership. Many global conferences, including the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994), the Fourth World Conference on women (1985), and the World Summit for Social Development (1995) have recognized that, despite the progress made globally in improving status of women, gender disparities still exist, especially in regard to participation in electoral politics as well as holding public posts/offices. The low participation of women in these positions affects their progress in improving the legal and regularity framework for promoting gender equality since very few women are influencing the legislative process. The rationale for promoting women's participation in political dispensation is based on equity, equality and development.

In Nigeria in line with global trend, women constitute nearly half of the total population and form a critical portion of enhancing democratization of political system in the country. However, available data indicates that they are inadequately represented in political positions in the government. The possible explanation for this scenario could be that gender issues in electoral politics have not received due attention and redress. Women are always relegated to the peripheries of political leadership. Democracy is about fair representation of all interest groups in the society and the low representation of women is a violation of the principles of democracy.

Despite the tremendous effort put forward by government and non-governmental organizations following the declaration made at the fourth world conference on women in Beijing which advocated 30% affirmative action for a more inclusive representation of women both in elective and appointive positions, Nigeria's women are still being marginalized due to the style of leadership inherent in the country. Women's participation in politics since Nigeria's independence in 1960 has been limited to providing support to male politicians; hence, lack of fair representation of women in the policy process in Nigeria is a problem to society. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the factors that hinder women's participation in politics in Uyo Senatorial District, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Gender is a socially and culturally constructed variable pegged on the role that men and women play in their daily lives. Gender refers to the attributes, opportunities and relationships associated with being a female and male, and the socio-cultural relationships between women and men, girls and boys. These attribute, opportunities and relationships are largely socially constructed and calculated through specialization processes. Like the concept of class and or ethnicity, gender is an analytical tool for a social process (Otu, 2008). Unlike sex, the identity of gender does not come from birth. It is socially and culturally constructed and can therefore be deconstructed overtime. Gender is not only about roles but also about relations. What people state that women or men are, or shall do, is related to the question of who sets the rules and for what functions (Akande, 2002). A person's sex as determined by his or her biology does not always correspond with his or her gender. In general terms, "sex" refers to the biological

differences between males and females such as the genitalia and genetic differences, "gender is more difficult to define, but it can refer to the role of a male or female in the society known as a greater role or an individual's concept of themselves or gender identity."

Historically, the term gender was adopted as "means of distinguishing between biological sex and socialized aspects of femininity and masculinity (Daniel & Faith, 2013). Empirical investigations suggest that gender roles are social construct that vary significantly across time, context and culture (Douglas, 2014). The differentiation between gender and sex did not arise until the late 1970s, when researchers began using "gender" and "sex" as two separate terms with "gender" referring to one's self-identity and "sex" referring to one's chromosomal make up and sex organs (Daniel, 2012).

### **Political Participation**

The term Political participation has been defined variously by many scholars for instance, Elkert and McConnel (2013) who described political participation as the process through which the individual plays a role in the political life of his society and has the opportunity to take part in deciding what common goals of the society are and the best way of achieving these goals. Akande (2003) posited that political participation is an aspect of political behaviour and it focuses on the way in which individuals take part in politics. The various ways by which the people can be involved in the political system include selection or election of political leaders, formulation of policies, community activities and other civil engagements. In the words of Arowola and Aluko (2010), the essence of political participation in any society, either civilized or primitive, is to seek control of power, acquisition of power and to influence decision making. Political participation is one of the fundamental requirements of democratic governance. This is the reason why Endale (2012) emphasized that ideally, democracy means individual participation in the decision that involves one's life. In a democratic system, there is the necessity for the citizenry to be fully involved in the democratic procedures of the choice of rulers and effective communication of the public policies and attitudes but the researcher sees political participation as the involvement of citizens in the political system. There is low level of political participation among the Nigerian citizens as many Nigerians are indifferent in political matter (Daniel, 2012). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) noted that Nigeria's participation during the last general elections was low. The Friedrich Elbert stifling foundation conducted a research on 2011 elections and identified lack of transparent elections, elections violence and politicians' non-committal to their campaign promises as major reasons for voters' apathy in the country (Oloyede, 2009).

Falade (2007) concluded that Nigeria's political culture has not given room for the entrenchment and sustenance of true democracy. Arowola and Aluko (2010) expressed that the low level of political participation of Nigerian women is becoming alarming and disturbing. Since the emergence of political independence in 1960, the Nigerian women have remained invisible in the political process. The marginal involvement of African women in the political process results from the lingering inhibitive cultural and patriarchal forces against women's engagement in politics that characterized African traditional societies (Agbalajobi, 2009). A study conducted by Kolawole, Adeigbe, Adebayo and Abubarkar (2013) using 700 respondents revealed that there was effect of gender on political participation. More males (30%) than females (13%) were highly involved in political activities. Again more males (38%) than females (12%) were regularly involved in voting exercise. Douglas (2014) pointed out that

although the Nigerian constitution permits women to take part in the political life of the nation, however, evidence shows that women's participation in politics has been peripheral.

In line with global trend, Nigerian women constitute nearly half of the population of the country. But despite the major roles women play in the population, women roles in the society are yet to be given recognition. This is due to some cultural stereotypes, abuse of religion, traditional practices and patriarchal societal structures. In Nigeria the awareness about the role of women in development of a nation came up in 1980s, the International Conference on Women in Beijing in 1985 enhanced the elective participation of women in politics in Nigeria. The under representation of women in political participation gained root due to the patriarchal system inherent in our society, much of which were obvious from pre-colonial era till date. Nonetheless, women's participation in political activities at all levels of governance, be it community, national or international level is still very low. Women tend to be discriminated against when it comes to active participation in politics and appointive public positions. This problem is seen to be prominent not only in Nigeria but in fact Uyo Senatorial District of Akwa Ibom State which is the focus of this paper.

**Table 1:** showing Statistics of Registered Voters by Gender in Akwa Ibom North East (Uyo) Senatorial District, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. (2019 Election)

S/N	LGA	CODE	REGISTERED MALE VOTERS	REGISTERED FEMALE VOTERS	TOTAL REGISTERED VOTERS
1	Etinan	07	36,289	34,229	<b>70,518</b>
2	Ibesikpo Asutan	09	43,635	40,869	<b>84,504</b>
3	Ibiono Ibom	10	49,022	41,378	<b>90,400</b>
4	Itu	16	34,234	32,108	<b>66,342</b>
5	Nsit Atai	19	24,273	20,106	<b>44,379</b>
6	Nsit Ibom	20	32,081	29,100	<b>61,181</b>
7	Nsit Ubium	21	33,858	27,594	<b>61,452</b>
8	Uruan	29	41,241	37,417	<b>78,658</b>
9	Uyo	31	104,448	106,731	<b>211,179</b>
	<b>Total</b>		<b>399,081</b>	<b>369,532</b>	<b>768,613</b>

*Source: Independent National Electoral Commission Akwa Ibom State (2019)*

The Table above shows statistics of registered voters by gender in Uyo Senatorial District, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The table indicate that participation of women in politics has been increased as compared to what has been increased as compared to what was obtainable in the past. However, this increase is only evidenced at the peripheral level (voting during

election). It does not reflect same at the apex of political involvement such as appointive and elective positions. The gap between male and female voters buttressed the level of women involvement. In spite of this, it is however observed that women in Uyo Senatorial District have not been able to translate their numerical strength into elective and appointive decisions.

Women in Uyo Senatorial District are continuously recorded low record of representation. This is evidence in the last concluded 2019 elections. Out of the twenty-six (26) members of Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly, only two (2) women were elected. In similar vein, in all twenty-one (21) members of the current cabinet of the present administration, only two are women of which non represent Uyo Senatorial District.

### **Impeding Factors to Women's Active Participation in Politics**

Available literature has shown that a number of factors act as barriers to women political participation. They vary from level of socio-economic development, to religious, culture and the type of political system. Such factors include:

**Patriarchy:** This refers to society ruled and dominated by men over women, which in turn has given rise to women being looked upon as mere household wives and non-partisans in decision making process and not to talk of coming out to vie for political positions. The family is the main institution of patriarchy, which is an important concept in explaining gender inequality. Literarily, it means "the rule of the father". In many societies, women are portrayed as weak and incapable of making smart decision. They have been depicted across generations to be only capable of trivial matters, and constantly engaging in gossip and hearsay and less intelligent. This was projected and reinforced through the years through male-dominated institutions and patriarchal societies which internalized the idea that the woman was inferior. With this, it became hard for women to pursue their political rights as active participants as such patriarchal attitudes make it even more difficult for a woman to enter politics. The truth is that such attitudes are not a thing of the past, such attitudes to women still exist in societies all over the world today; in both developed and developing countries (Umer, Ofhman & Hassan, 2016). In the Nigerian society, men and women have clearly defined roles that are dictated by the dominant ideology which is patriarchy. Men are taken as breadwinners, heads of households who have authority to represent the family outside the home.

The exclusion of women in political participation and decision making processes was intenerated by human history. In many countries, traditions continue to emphasize women's primary roles as mothers and housewives and restrict them to these roles. Societies all over the world are dominated with the ideology of "a woman's place". According to this ideology, women should only play the role of "working mothers", which is generally low-paid and apolitical. So that today, cultural values about women can affect women's levels of representation throughout the political process. Hence, women face prejudice as leaders because people tend to assume that leadership is a masculine trait.

**Religious and Cultural Barriers:** Culturally, women are overburdened with different household's activities like cooking, taking care of the kids, washing and so on. These activities make women busy in the household and impede their involvement in the politics of their country. In line with this, a study conducted by Elkert and McConnell (2013) identified several factors that hinder women participation in political sphere, revealing that women have to do house duties, gardening and washing up while men go out for duty and also go to further studies outside the family as women stay back to take care of the family. Historically, there is a belief

that women are supposed to be led not lead. In this regard, traditional attitude towards gender equality influences women advancement in political participation. Theories of socialization have long emphasized the enduring division of roles within a society especially the existence of egalitarian attitudes towards women in the private and public spheres. Socialization theories emphasize that these attitudes are acquired early in life through formative agencies, including the existence of traditional sex role learnt in the home and family; local community, and in schools as well as in the workplace. Owing to these, most women seem to be discouraged from participating in politics.

Religion is another major important source of cultural belief that impedes or hinders women's participation in politics. The major religions of the world are differently conservatives or patriarchal in their views about the place of women both in the church hierarchy and in the society. Hence, exclusion of women from religious institutions and religious leadership seems to have a negative impact on women's status in the society and limit their opportunities in politics. Both Christianity and Islam do not accord women many roles in public life, and same is obtainable in most cultural values, where women are seen culturally as quite submissive and image of virtue. However, women are not to be seen in public domain and this becomes a challenge to women participation in politics. More so, women found in the corridor of politics are not often religious in practice (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). In most religions, power and authority is believed to divinely belong to men hence, subjugating women. Thus, women are encouraged to play subsidiary roles since their place is in the kitchen and men are the decision makers. Religion has long been used to exclude women from aspects of social, political or religious life around the world. The poor condition of women in Nigeria is attributed to the rigid customs of society. Social, religious and cultural values make women appear to be inferior citizens and this discourages them from active participation in politics.

**Political Violence:** Nigerian election has often times been characterized by one form of violence or another. Since the return of democracy, female aspirants of various political parties cannot withstand political violence, therefore women participation in politics is drastically reduced. Election violence is a coercive and deliberate strategy used by political actors such as opposition parties, incumbents etc. to advance their interest as well as achieve specific political aims in relation to electoral contest. Thus, many politicians resort to illicit electoral strategies to win the election.

In a study conducted by Olufunke (2013) on violence and women participation in politics, the researcher examined the role of violence in the context of politicking and women's political participation stakeholders with men in the political process. A structured questionnaire was administered to 200 respondents while conducting in-depth interviews on 50 women. The study revealed that all forms of violence in politics make politics an uninteresting human endeavor for women because women cannot survive effectively in any violent environment. The study also revealed that other socio cultural and spousal factors operate to hinder women from participating in politics. Endale (2012) explained that the reason why elections are rigged is that people want to remain in power or get into power by all ramifications resulting in violence such as intimidation, assassination and other corrupt practices. Although other factors impede women's participation in politics, political violence has discouraged women immensely from politics especially in Uyo Senatorial District, Akwa Ibom State.

**Low Income:** Another major factor impeding active participation of women in politics is low income as active political participation is associated with high expenditure and therefore requires one to have a good income in addition to other financial sources. Socio-economic status of women to a greater extent plays a significant role in enhancing their participation in politics. In other words, lack of economic resources is one of the biggest obstacles that prevent women from participating in politics in greater number. Competing for political positions in Nigeria requires huge financial backup. Most Nigerian women who seek these positions could not afford meeting the financial obligations therein; the case is no different in Uyo Senatorial District, Akwa Ibom State.

However, a study conducted by Khaden (2013) with 150 sample size revealed that there are other factors that impede women from active participation in politics even though their economic status may have improved. These include cultural factors such as the patriarchal nature of household set up in African societies. Chuka (2009) affirmed that even in countries where women have made gains in employment or education, they still face cultural barriers to participation in politics. Muhammed and Zaid (2014) in their study submitted that though it is a fact that women's participation in political life depends largely on their access to employment which gives them not only material independent but also professional skills and self-confidence, inactive participation of women in politics may still prevail as women still depend on men or their husbands for approval as hierarchical culture impedes women's involvement in electoral politics.

**Low Level of Education:** Education is one important factor that impedes women active participation in politics. The low participation of women in education is also part of the shortcomings. This explains why most women are least qualified for political offices due to low education attainment. This is also an effect of colonialism, where men were more favoured than women. Nevertheless, not every woman acquires political degree or knowledge, as such, they are not conversant with the political orientation to enable participation.

**Meeting Schedules:** The time scheduled for caucus meetings to strategize and map out political plans either for the pre or post- election periods are odd and not conducive for family women. The slated time is often when women are expected to take care of their children and family. This method of schedules is viewed as an attempt to side-line women from engaging in political process. This factor is an impediment to women participation in politics. For instance, a married woman with kids could be insulted if she attends political party meetings frequently or at late hours. She may be accused even by her fellow women for negligence of her kids and husband. Moreover, a typical Nigerian man/husband would suspect her of having extra marital affairs since the wife would be coming home very late. These discourage and impede women's active participation in politics

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Liberal Feminism:** liberal feminism theory is associated with African and American women such as Jessie Benard, Mary Wollestonecraft, Mari, Steward, Charlotte Fortein, etc. the theory was developed in 1990 and focuses on women's ability to maintain their equality through their own actions and choices (Tong, 1992). Liberal feminist believe that women's subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance to and success in the so-called public world. Hence, they strive for sexual equality via political and legal reform (Tong, 1992). Otu (2008) posits that the central assumption of liberal feminism is

anchored on an identification of the existence of separate public and private spheres of social activity for men and women.

Hence, liberal feminism advocates for women's freedom and identified factors mitigating against women's participation in politics which are to be eliminated. This action is to ensure women are given basic rights to contribute adequately to the development of society.

### **Equality and Empowerment Framework**

The women's equality and empowerment framework was developed by Sarah Hlupekite Longwe and published in 1990. The basic premise of this theory is that women's development can be viewed in terms of five levels of equality which include welfare, access, conscientization, participation and control. According to Longwe, empowerment is essential at each of these levels (Leach, 2003). Empowerment is the process through which women are mobilized to understand, identify and overcome the structural and underlying causes of discrimination and thereby achieve equality of welfare and equal access to resources. Therefore empowerment requires that women should be mobilized to be more visible and create meaningful impact in the family organization and society at large. (Sahay, 1998).

The implication of this theory anchors on the fact that women are marginalized in sensitive positions such as political, socio-economic, religious affairs and many others which would have helped trigger development in society. This had led to higher degree of gender based inequality relegating women to second class citizens. However, the women equality and empowerment theory advocates that inequality and discrimination meted out against women can only be resolved through empowerment therefore increasing their access to equal opportunities and resource in society.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to discuss the concept of gender and political participation and identified six critical factors that act as an impediment to women's active participation in politics in Uyo Senatorial District, Akwa Ibom State and the Nigerian society at large. Such factors include patriarchy, religious and cultural barriers, political violence, low income, low level of education and meeting schedule. Political participation which is the manifestation of democracy allows for diversity of opinion and participation of both men and women and cannot thrive by excluding the women folk that constitute half of the world's population. Active participation of women on equal terms with men at all levels of decision making is essential to the achievement of equality, sustainable development, peace and democracy. The paper adopted two theories to explain women's participation in politics; the liberal feminism and women's equality and empowerment framework. The paper concluded that women's active participation in Uyo Senatorial District, Akwa Ibom State is still quite minimal as compared to 30% and 35% of Beijing outcome as well as National Gender Policy (NGP) recommendations.

### **Recommendations**

Following the trends and happenings around the political environment in Nigeria, it is becoming clearer that women may not achieve the mandated 30% affirmation as enshrined in the Beijing plan of action except the following recommendations are adhered to:

1. Political parties should create a support network for prospective aspirant by paring them with established women politicians as mentors.

2. An enabling environment that allows women to engage meaningfully in decision making process in a sustainable and effective way that is free from violence and harassment of any kind should be created.
3. The quota system should be introduced at all levels of government and relevant stakeholders such as independent National Electoral Commission and political parties should be engaged to ensure strict adherence to it.
4. There is urgent need for political education in Nigeria. This should not be limited to the school system, rather formal and informal approaches should be adopted to orientate the citizens on the need for active participation in the political system. There is need for mass political enlightenment through the media, adult education program and civil associations. The citizens should be conscious of the dangers of political apathy.
5. Independent funding and placing limit on campaign spending may enhance women participation in politics as well as reduce the amount for purchase of forms for political positions.

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