

**SEX AND POLITICS:
A HERMENEUTICAL ANALYSIS OF
WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This paper examines how women's participation in Nigeria politics creates negative popular narratives about women's political participation. It is generally believed that women involved in politics mirror shady sexual objectification. This narrative engenders apathy among women who would have otherwise participated in politics. This narrative also reveals how Nigerian women's personal lives shape arguments about their political potentials and also show a deep continuous denigration of women as objects of sex and weak entities, and how these limit political participation among women. Using hermeneutical analysis, this paper seeks to understand and interpret these narratives in the construction of gender identity in Nigeria, the relationship between individual agency and personal encounters and the power of popular narrative in shaping political behaviour. Also, this analysis will broaden our understanding of Nigerian women's contributions to the development of politics in Nigeria.

Key words: Hermeneutic, gendered identity, narratives, objectification, politics

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to look critically at the sexist and discriminatory dimensions of women's participation in politics in the Nigerian context. There are many types of sexist stereotypes that are often taken for granted to the extent that the social acceptance of these stereotypes forms the essential parts of the narratives about politics and women in politics. In a patriarchal society like Nigeria, women are often spoken of in relation to a man. You see, many people wishing to know whether a particular female politician is married and whether her husband has allowed her to be in politics or who is sponsoring her in this venture and also why they are sponsoring her. These types of questions are invasive and mirror the public perception of women in politics, and essentially saying that a woman cannot be in politics especially becoming a successful politician. Central to this public inquiry about a woman in politics is the idea that a woman in politics must be a sex toy to male politicians. No matter how successful a woman politician is, she is often seen as a harlot, a woman that used "bottom power" to get ahead. These social constructs need to be examined philosophically to ascertain their origins, what they say about society and how intellectual engagements will further understand these constructs to better understand women's participation in politics. Nigeria is a special case as there has always been a clamour for more women participation in politics, especially as there is an increased feminist consciousness among young women in Nigeria. However, there is no sign that as more women show interest in politics and participate, there will be a reduced stereotype against them. If anything has remained unchanged. People have continued to believe that a woman in politics is a slut, a wayward person, and an irresponsible person. Amidst all these prejudices, there is no concrete evidence to show that women in politics engage in sexual expeditions to get ahead. But this social myth persists given the overtly rough terrain, politics has become. So there is a need to examine these in order to get to the root sources of

these beliefs.

Feminist Collective and Women Participation in Politics

In recent years discussions concerning women's rights and the lack thereof have become prevalent in the public space. The social media exacerbates these discussions and creates a form of women's collective in which we see increasingly women bonding together to uproot various biologically dependent sexist analyses that is prevalent in society. The women's conference in Beijing, which took place in 1995 served as an outpouring of a feminist collective which instilled a certain level of collective action as to what women must do in order to end the ostracism in public service participation. This conference invested great hope in the mass adoption of gender mainstreaming as a strategy for transforming human development through a more complementary gender role. This has borne fruits worldwide. More and more countries are living up to the affirmative action recommended by the Beijing conference and more and more discussions are done in positive light concerning women participating in politics.

The Beijing conference represents solidarity among women, a collective for a radical reshaping of society in line with feminist conceptions. 'The concepts of feminist solidarity and collective action are founded on beliefs about the role of individuals in engaging with others to bring about radical, visionary change, standing and acting together.'¹ This "acting together" as a collective, represents a strongly gendered dimension in women's lives and fosters social action that dovetails into political participation. This means women discussing their lives, analysing their shared experiences of injustice and oppression, and developing common goals. Fundamentally, it is about understanding and challenging gender-specific constraints on women's options, which prevent them from achieving their true potential. In gender and development literature on women's empowerment, collective association and action are depicted as

¹C. Sweetman, "Introduction, Feminist Solidarity and Collective Action" *Gender and Development*, Vol. 21, No.2, 2013, 217-22.

politically essential in supporting them to challenge male oppression.²

The push towards challenging male-centred oppressions bifurcate society into “us and them” and introduces a power nexus that is designed to challenge the current oppressive and sexist dimensions of women's struggles with men and society in general. The political struggles that ensue as soon as men-centred oppressions are confronted show a completely dysfunctional relations that exist in the male-dominated society which tends to instrumentalise the women and objectify them as tools in the hands of men. This mentality 'points out the complex disadvantage that women face, not only from gender inequality, but from a combination of other identity-based forms of discrimination. They face the fear of losing their livelihoods, of violent reprisals, and of losing their means of survival by alienating those who give them the means to eke out an existence, while exploiting them.³

Therefore, the feminist collective is not only fighting for an equitable society, it is fighting for its own survival in a male-dominated construction. In its more radical form, the feminist collective is not about some form of modification of the patriarchal system characterized by power, competition, dominance, and hierarchy, used in oppressing women; it is geared towards its complete elimination.⁴ To eliminate this entails a radical modification of the biological underpinnings of women's oppression which has long held that women can't obtain some form of a balancing act in society as long as the biology is perceived as the defining factor in the understanding of women. According to Firestone, the sexual imbalance of power was biologically based and is fundamentally described as: 1. Women throughout history (before birth control)

²N. Kabeer, 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment', in Naila Kabeer, *Gender Mainstreaming in Poverty Eradication and the MDGs: A Handbook for Policymakers and Other Stakeholders*, London: Commonwealth Secretariat/Ottawa: IDRC/CDRI, 2003, 169-196.

³C.Sweetman, “Introduction, Feminist Solidarity and Collective Action”, 222.

⁴R. Tong, “Feminist thought: A comprehensive introduction”, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press., 1989, 16.

have been at the mercy of their biology (menstruating, pregnant, giving birth, and breastfeeding) making them dependent upon males for survival. 2. Human infants are dependent for a long time after birth, limiting their mothers' options. 3. This basic mother/child interdependency has existed in some form in every society, past or present, and thus shapes the psychology of women and infants 4. The reproductive differences between the sexes led to the first division of labour based on gender, which is at the origin of all further divisions into economic and cultural classes and cases (i.e., the origin of all discriminations). Thus, the inequality between men and women can be traced to the human body and to the women's biologic imperative for childbearing and child-rearing.⁵

The feminist collective, therefore, centres on accepting this biological imperative and then modifying society to ignore the biological and existential predicament and focus on the humanity of women. This will require a radical exorcism of society to the extent that the biological underpinnings of gender-based discrimination must now collapse.

To achieve this collapsing of the biological imperatives that feed the patriarchal society, the surest way for the feminist collective is to make inroads towards political participation with the view towards engendering social change through this participation. To participate in politics, feminists have rejected the formal/informal⁶ notions of political participation.⁷ It is generally believed that the informal sphere of political participation has to do with grassroots activism where disempowered citizens easily participate; and this is where women are most effective. The formal political sphere is regarded as where “real” politics takes place and where few women if

⁵S. Firestone, *The dialectic of sex: The case for feminist revolution*. New York: Morrow books, 1970, 45.

⁶N. Naples and M. Desai, “Women's Local and Translocal Responses: an Introduction to the Chapters” in Nancy Naples and Manisha Desai (eds.) *Women's Activism and Globalization*. New York: Routledge, 2002, 11-33.

⁷F. Miraftab, “Invited and Invented Spaces of Participation: Neoliberal Citizenship and Feminists' Expanded Notion of Politics”. *Wagadu*, Volume 1, 2004, 1-7.

any, can venture to. The feminist collective counters these binary assumptions and insist that both the conceptual formal and informal spheres are viable political arenas where women can participate and shape society.

However, a simple numerical expansion of women in politics may not translate into the effective representation of feminist collectives' interests in the development of policy-making which can lead to the collapsing of patriarchy. It cannot be assumed that women politicians are necessarily committed to representing women's interests when they join politics. Indeed, few of them will have succeeded in politics by promoting a feminist platform in a male-dominated political sphere.⁸ To join politics, women collectively initially ignore the thorny issues of gender and simply focus on the very idea that women ought to be in politics. Political participation on the platform of transforming society to collapse patriarchal stereotypes and promote equality will be so problematic that it can be counter-effective. These kinds of topics can be profoundly threatening to men's privileges, individually and collectively, and unsurprisingly arouse considerable resistance. At stake in considerations of developmental democracy from a gender perspective, then, is whether democratic institutions can achieve enough autonomy from dominant gender interests to challenge male privileges and promote the policies necessary for this kind of social change.⁹ Women joining politics, banks on kick-starting discussions that can engender such autonomy so that in the long run gender-based bias or biologically dependent bias will be a thing of the past. But given the conditions and the deep-rooted stereotypes in society, a woman in politics is regarded, by and large, a bad idea.

Sexual Lives and Political Women

When women do join politics, they face myriad accusations and condescension of the society including from women themselves.

⁸A. M. Goetz, "Women in Politics & gender equity in policy: South Africa & Uganda", *Review of African Political Economy*, 25:76, 1998, 241-262.

⁹*Ibid.*

There is a general belief that women in politics are of easy virtue and could not have gotten far in politics without granting sexual favours to men who promote them or those who sponsor them financially. According to comments from Alliance for Africa on a workshop about sexual harassment, more women do not enter politics because of sexual harassment or perceptions of it. The participants, especially the women, maintained that it was because of the issue of sexual harassment that many women are deprived and discouraged in politics. They said, “even the men who are not politicians do not allow their wives to participate in the game of politics because it is assumed here that women in politics lack virtue.”¹⁰ Women themselves agree that politics is a 'dirty game.'¹¹

According to Ugwuegede:

In Nigeria, women who are actively participating in politics are seen and treated as free women (prostitutes/wayward) of easy virtues, stubborn people, whores, too domineering, cultural rebellions, etc. It is observed that during the campaign, the political opponents (mostly men) use the alleged loose moral standing of these women against them and often insult them directly in public. Thus, they are often subjected to public ridicule and are socially stigmatized by both men and women. The use of negative labeling; derogatory names; abusive language and expressions to describe Nigerian women in politics discourage many of them

¹⁰Alliance for Africa,(no date) “Sexual harassment among others, a continued struggle for Women who participate in Nigerian Politics” Seen at <https://alliancesforafrica.org/sexual-harassment-among-others-a-continued-struggle-for-women-who-participate-in-nigerian-politics/> assessed 30th May 2019.

¹¹D. T. Agbalajobi, “Women's participation and the political process in Nigeria: Problems and prospects” *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* Vol. 4(2), 2010, 075-082.

*from active participation in the nation's politics.*¹²

This is clearly a representation of the common views of women in politics in Nigeria and it is a candidate's idea of a patriarchal society. It is believed that since a woman is a weaker sex, and is dependent on men, there is no way she can muster the resources required to make headway into politics. It has to be through granting sexual favours to her sponsors and being ready to “sleep” with any supporter of important repute. It is believed that without this, a woman has no way of making it in politics.

There is ample evidence that this mindset is rife in the political sphere helping to fuel this misogynistic mindset. Prominent female politicians are always presented on social media and even in mainstream media as being sex seeking females. There are accusations and a counter-accusation that tends to fuel this well-established myth. For example, Badmus related the well-publicized accusation made by a female politician against a male politician. This accusation is seen as a norm and the woman is only making it public because the affair fell through.¹³ What this entails is that women's participation in politics in Nigeria has something to do with sex. The sex lives of the women involved are presented in public and judgments are passed on to them. Even the state of their families is x-rayed. Narratives arise about most women politicians. It is said that the women dominate their husbands to the extent that their husbands cannot do anything to prevent their career even though the husbands know that politics is a “dirty game”. The narratives make the husbands victims of powerlessness. The husbands cannot say much since their wives' have other more powerful men than they. Social media and public opinion are riddled with such stories. From this, it is taken for granted that successful female politicians got there through having sexual affairs with male politicians or the powers that pilot

¹²N. P. Ugwuegede, “Challenges to Women Active Participation in Politics in Nigeria” *Sociology and Anthropology* 2(7): 2014, 284-290.

¹³See, B. “Anisulowo accuses PDP leaders of seeking sexual favors from her, others” in *Nigerian Tribune*, Wednesday, 28th February 2007, p.1.

political affairs. Central to this urban myth is the idea of 'godfather'. In Nigerian politics, the 'godfather' is the person that pays the bill. He is the financial progenitor of the political project. He picks from among the people interested in holding various political positions and sponsors them financially so that they would be able to scale the hurdles of politics. The godfather provides the background and influence needed to ensure a successful political career.

Godfatherism is not strange in Nigerian sociological realities. It is a long-accepted tradition that a younger person should learn and prosper under the tutelage and support of a more experienced patron. Godfatherism is also used to connote the power and influence of people who are politically relevant and savvy in deciding who gets nominated to contest elections and who eventually wins the election. Godfathers are highly politically mobile and can sway political support to the political party and/or candidate behind which they throw their political weight using various means.¹⁴

According to Albert Olawale, 'a person of lesser social status attaches himself to another person, usually of higher status, for support, which could be social or economic. The godfather gets something in return from the adopted son for the transactional relationship'. These godfathers are seen in the social and economic spheres in Nigeria and have now been transferred to the political spheres.¹⁵ In the political sphere; it gets tricky given the strange dimensions it has taken. Most godfathers demand the near-impossible from their clients. Albert Olawale also mentioned that 'giving of kola by a client to his patron is also not strange. What is probably strange is the transposition of this social or economic system into the political arena and also the ridiculous nature of what patrons now ask from their clients as compensation for providing them with 'brokerage services'. The present-day godfatherism is a

¹⁴N. Bassey, and E. Enetak, "Godfatherism and Good Governance in Nigeria: An appraisal of Nigeria's Fourth Republic" *Journal of Social and Policy*, Vol.3, No4, 2014, 137-143.

¹⁵I. O. Albert, "Explaining "Godfatherism" in Nigerian politics" *African Sociological Review / Revue Africaine de Sociologie*, Review 9, Vol. 2, 2014, 79-105.

primordial tradition taken to a criminal extent'.¹⁶

Most male politicians try to give 'kola' and other gratifications to their godfathers. In the case of women, it can indeed be tricky as it is believed that the 'kola' given by the females to their own godfathers is nothing but sex even though additional financial incentives are also imperative if the female wins a 'juicy office'. In the public narratives, we see that it is taken for granted that the client will always 'settle' his godfather with financial gratification while the females settle the godfather with sexual favours.

Given the dimensions of these narratives about sex being the main currency when a woman joins politics, the women themselves have shunned politics for this very reason. Many women agree with the narratives and in order to preserve their integrity, they avoid partisan politics.

Hermeneutics of Women Political Participation: Towards a Critical Understanding

Hermeneutics has become one of the alternative voices of contemporary philosophy used in assessing the human intellect and social conditions. It has long become the mainstream in philosophy and has garnered profound influences. Hermeneutics has once again come into use as a response to the totalizing and the perennial nature of epistemology which seeks to assert that knowledge and understanding are indeed a-historical and apodictic entities. But given the rise of postmodernism and also the consequences of Gettier's counter examples, hermeneutics have become a viable alternative voice in bypassing the protracted debate about traditional epistemology and Kantian ideas of epistemology which has characterized twentieth-century philosophy.¹⁷ According to Maddox:

“The term ' hermeneutics' was originally used to designate a classical discipline that formulated rules for correctly interpreting texts. Early forms of this discipline can be found in biblical studies, philology and

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷E Gettier, “Is Justified True belief Knowledge,” *Analysis*, Vol. 23, 1963, 121-123.

jurisprudence. The philosophical discussion of hermeneutics, which began in the nineteenth century, likewise initially engaged in the development of rules for proper interpretation. As the discussion developed, however, its attention shifted to the more basic question of the conditions of the very possibility of understanding. The distinctive characteristic that emerged in this 'hermeneutic' discussion of understanding was a rejection of classical Cartesian and Kantian epistemology. Indeed, hermeneutics has more or less taken the place of epistemology for these philosophers. To be sure, they usually refuse to identify hermeneutics with epistemology, but this is due to the empiricist and reductionist connotations which they sense in the latter term. There are essentially two problems which hermeneutic philosophers have with traditional epistemology. First, they disagree with the reduction of the entire cognitive process to a single model drawn basically from the natural sciences - i.e. empirical observation. Second, they reject the a-historical conception of the knower as one who stands outside of that which is known and imposes meaning upon it".¹⁸

Critical hermeneutics are used to assess tradition in order to correct it based on human interests. In other words, each human idea, in this case, women's participation in politics must be examined as a historical process that has arisen to enhance human life. So its contours and dimensions must be examined to show that there are no personal and sectional appeals inherent in it since if there are such flaws, it cannot then serve the human's interests. So critical hermeneutics are humanistic in essence and seeks to use philosophical arguments to remove merely pragmatic or existential components from ideas and enshrine in the idea progress for

¹⁸R. Maddox, "Contemporary Hermeneutic Philosophy and Theological Studies", *Religious Studies*, 21, 1985, 517-529.

humanity if that is possible. The major hermeneutical theorist of this idea was Jurgen Habermas. Habermas articulated the fact that not all tradition is acceptable or desirable.¹⁹ Therefore, the project of hermeneutics is to correct tradition, in this case, women's participation in politics. Correcting it means inculcating emancipatory cognitive interest in it. In some cases due to historical developments, in some concepts or traditions, it is impossible to have an intersubjective correction of a concept or idea so the concept or idea is discarded as being sectional.

The push for the enthronement of women's participation in politics has permeated the world unmolested and has become the key idea for the understanding of today's socio-economic and rights landscape. But the desire for women to participate in politics enthrones a binary position among those who want it and those who reject it. The fact of this debate arises from the cultural perceptions in traditional societies carried over into modern life and which does not augur well with modern life. It is believed in most traditional societies in Nigeria that women are to be seen not heard and women are as a matter of biology weak. This particular mindset has continued to entrench sexist dependent stereotypes that limited general progress that women can participate in. Its metaphysics remains superiority of the male sex. The conquering spirit entrenched in our understanding of the male sex continues to enrich the males and pauperizing the female sex making the females mostly dependent on the male. This pauperization creates a hybrid stranger who is outside the profitable sphere of human development. The hybrid stranger or the female sex is given crumbs from the table of our patriarchal society since the males decide where the resources and integral existence goes to. These crumbs are used to create a façade as if the exclusion of women is in proper order for society. The patriarchal society continues to create more and more stereotypes pushing these from one generation to another to safeguard a society where female participation is muted. The continuous presence of sexism and stereotyping in society militates against integral development and progress and sabotages

¹⁹*Ibid.*

the complete development of the female sex.

According to OECD, the fact that women are not given the full power to realize themselves in a nondiscriminatory environment, society is worse off. The more women are not empowered, the more society is poor economically.²⁰ Apart from this, men suffer too because (as) conforming to masculine roles of competitive and ambitious self-seeking can put pressure on them and deprive them of joys that can come from parenting and having intimate respectful relationships. Stereotypes and gender discriminations resulting therefrom having high costs in terms of development, impeded democracy, human rights denied and peace and security endangered.²¹

So, the critical question that arises is; do women participation in politics serves as a tool for the progress of humanity? Here progress is a moral concept that represents a holistic advancement of humanity based on sound morality. The new and emerging concept that seeks to deal with the obvious ostracization of women by the patriarchal society is offered by this paper as a De-feminization. De-feminization is indeed a concept that has at its core a counter-movement away from the radical insistence of radical feminists towards a more diffused social engagement. In other words, the feminine is redefined not just from the point of view of biology, but from the point of view of progressive and necessary contributions. Radical feminism and the general feminist collective impose on society a mandatory acceptance of women in politics without waiting for society to accept women as political leaders based on organic and intellectual development. The current stereotypes of our patriarchal

²⁰OECD Observer, "Fighting poverty means fighting sexism" Seen at http://oecdobserver.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/5556/Fighting_poverty_means_fighting_sexism.html. Assessed 30th May 2019.

²¹UN Women (2011) "Countering Gender Discrimination and Negative Gender Stereotypes: Effective Policy Responses" seen at <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2011/7/countering-gender-discrimination-and-negative-gender-stereotypes-effective-policy-responses>. assessed May 30th 2019.

society are mythical in nature and arise from the various perspectives about power and control. The society demands that men ought to always be in control of women. This mindset can change if there is a more diffusive understanding of the female sex. The female sex is not seen just from the feminine perspective, but from the contribution, it can offer based on her special nature and from her special experiences. Hence de-feminization.

De-feminization as a contribution of this paper is not seeking to remove the feminine nature from reality, but to embed it with the male as living being-together. Women are not exclusively female given the interactions that embody them daily. So the idea of exclusivity, exclusive female sex bereft of any male dimension in the intellect is mute. Men and women's history intertwine and this produces a special knowledge about life and when this understanding is harnessed. According to Shetler, 'men and women keep and transmit historical knowledge by the paths that they walk each day and the outside/inside positions that they occupy in the imagined male and female spaces that permeate their world. These sets of knowledge signify separate, though interdependent realms of authority deployed by men and women in their everyday routines'.²²

Conclusion

This paper is about women's participation in politics and the difficulties they face and how if women are truly allowed in politics, they can offer special improvements and progress for Nigeria as a country. The current difficulties faced by women arise from an entrenched stereotype that derogates women's sexual lives mostly based on biology. Women as the receiver sex in a sexual encounter have been exploited to produce a highly damaging urban myth concerning their participation in politics. This is happening in the face of the demands made by the feminist collective who demands

²²J. B. Shetler, "The Gendered Spaces of Historical Knowledge: Women's Knowledge and Extraordinary Women in the Serengeti District, Tanzania" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2003), 2003, 283-307.

that women should as a matter of course or law participate in politics. This feminist demand has become influential to the extent that some countries made it law and push women into politics without any consideration for the current perceptions of the female sex. Most women in politics are seen as lacking virtue or being easy. This mindset has been exploited to prevent a full acceptance of the demands of the feminist collective. This paper is of the view that women participating in politics are highly desirable idea as long as a new understanding of the female is gradually visited on society, especially our patriarchal society. This concept of de-feminization is introduced to mirror a new woman understood from the perspective of embodying society. Given the specialness of women, especially in their daily intellectual encounters with the male, it is believed that women offer a special kind of knowledge and presence and these can be used in politics for the progress of society.