

Women Participation in Rivers State Grass-Root Politics: A Community Development Perspective

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Abstract

Women are key factors in any society. No doubt, their sidelining or exclusion in the political arena and other decision making process is a problem that cannot be overlooked or swallowed hook, line and sinker. In Rivers State, the Judiciary arm of government is on hold presently because of a female appointment into the office of the Chief Justice of the State. This development motivated the study which examined women participation in grass-root politics: A community development perspective. The study with a sample size of 500 respondents identified economical disadvantage, phobia for political vices amongst others as barriers to women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics. On the influence of women participation in politics on community development, it was accepted that women participation in politics, will increase women commitment to community goals and objectives achievement, influence and promote policies and programmes for the advancement of the women. Based on these findings, the study recommended sensitization and continuous creation of awareness to inform women on the need to be economically empowered as a way of facilitating their entry and relevance into politics, which will hitherto enhance development of their communities.

Keywords: Women, Politics, Participation, Community Development

1. Introduction

Woman as a person is an agent of reproduction of life itself. This places her in the position of the life blood of the entire humanity. She is the first teacher, the sustainer and maintainer of the home, the peacemaker, the symbol of beauty and major molder of the character of a child. It is for these reasons that the Holy Bible referred to her as the virtuous woman. She is a mother of the human race. As mothers and wives, women do extent considerable impact on the productivity of male workers. By their sheer psychological, physiological and intellectual makeup, they do perform more than mere complimentary roles in the production process (Jeminiwa, 1995).

Over the decades, the issues concerning women have taken on new dimension and received varied treatment by the United Nations and its specialized agencies. The principle of equality of men and women was recognized in the United Nations charter in 1945 and subsequently in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The contributions made by women had not been recognized until recently when the United Nations declared the Decade for Women (1976-1985) making it mandatory on governments to focus on issue of women as an integral component of national development. This is because the development of a nation and establishment of a just, equitable balanced, viable, healthy and prosperous society depends to a large extent on the full and active participation of women in the political deliberation and key economic activities of that nation, beyond the window dressing of featuring in the fanfare at political rallies and similar events.

Many global conferences, including the Cairo conference in Population and Development in 1994, the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 and the world Summit for Social development in 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. The situation in Nigeria is not different despite being a signatory in these conferences. Democracy presupposes a pluralistic system that is all-inclusive. However, Nigeria politics is predominantly politics of men. Men dominate the political arena, formulate the rules of the political game and define the standards for evaluation.

Rivers State being the study area has been ruled and dominated by men in all the arms of government and has never had a female Governor since its creation till date. Less than 20 women have emerged as ward councilors in the 23 Local Government Areas of Rivers State between 1999 to 2014. Appointment of a female justice of the state for the first time brought about a feud that is holding the entire judiciary to a standstill as at the time of this documentation. Political life is based on male norms and values and in some cases even male lifestyle. Charles de Gaulle once said “politics is too serious a business to be left in the hands of politicians”. According to Adedotun (2010), if Charles de Gaulle were alive, he would offer a revised version of his oft-quoted maxim for Nigeria, “Politics is too serious a business to be left solely in the hands of men”. In Nigeria, politics is presumed to be a man’s turf, where No Woman Needs Apply (Nwana)-an unspoken slogan reminiscent of the discrimination against Irish nationals in 19th Century Britain.

This unwritten rule is one that only a small percentage of the female population has defined

successfully with reference to the controversial census conducted in 2006. It is ironic that women are systemically excluded from participating in the process in Nigeria and elsewhere. It is therefore, arguable that addressing the issues surrounding women's inclusion in political life is a key to the emergency of an economically and sustainable society.

2. Statement of the Problem

Regardless of the progress made by women in such areas as education, the professions and employment, the women still remain largely excluded from the mainstream of political activities of most societies including Rivers State, Nigeria. Even with the resolution made at Beijing women conference of 1995, that thirty percent of all elective offices be reserved for women, women are yet to come into politics in Nigeria. Women participation in grass-root politic has been only in the fringes. Yet when it is time for politics, women are mobilized to vote. Women are considered only good for fanfares for political rallies – dressed up for singing, dancing and clapping, after which they are given insignificant gift items like bags of rice and its condiments, wrappers, etc to share. Women are only seen but not heard in the political arena. Therefore, it is the aim of this study to identify barriers to women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics.

3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. Identify the barriers to women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics.
- ii. Determine the extent women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics has influenced community development.

4. Research Questions:

- i. What are the barriers to women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics?
- ii. To what extent has women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics influenced community development?

5. Area of Study

Rivers State with its headquarters as Port Harcourt is one of the 36 States of Nigeria and also one of the States in the South-South geopolitical zones of Nigeria. It covers an area of 11,077km, with a population of 6,689.079m. Rivers State is bounded on the south by the Atlantic Ocean, to the north by Imo, Abia and Anambra States, to the east by Akwa Ibom State and to the west by Bayelsa and Delta States. The inland parts consist of tropical rain forest towards the coast, the typical Niger Delta environment features of mainly mangrove swamps. It is made up of different linguistic groups such as Ikwerre, Kalabari, Ogoni, Okrika, Ekpeye, etc. Politically, it is divided into three Senatorial Districts: Rivers East, Rivers West and Rivers South. These districts share the twenty three Local Government Areas that make up the State.

6. Community Development and Women Participation in Politics

Different reasons are adduced for the low level of the involvement of women in politics. For instance, some are of the opinion that as nature would have, women cannot muster the required strength to weather the storms of politics. According to Abiola and Lanre (2003), “tacticians believe that politics is a game for the tough, and success should be achieved through toil and not concession. It should be a situation where when the going gets tough, only the tough move along. With first term of four years gone in the politics of the fourth republic, events appear to have moved to a pedestal that cannot be contemplated by weaklings”. Studies by Adhiambo-oduol, (2003), Bari, (2005), and Duke, (2010) identified local tradition/ cultural beliefs and value systems as important impediments to the participation of women in most facets of public life. African tradition have mainly defined and ascribed separate roles to males and females.

According to Izubara and Chijioke, (2003), Gagent, (2004) the systematic exclusion of women from political participation and government in Nigeria is traceable to the colonial experience. They argued that the Europeans infested Nigeria with her overly male-privileging political ideologies and values. No doubt with all the barriers mentioned, the exclusion of women from politics translates to their exclusion from the developmental processes of the nation.

The participation of women in community and national development is an issue that cannot be over flogged and therefore, fundamentally important. Women are an integral part of our population and also an essential tool for community development. Anyanwun (1992), recognized women as primary ingredients for any national growth and developmental effort. He stressed that community development as a prerequisite to social and economical development must assume the important role of mobilizing the creative energies of human labour, especially women as a necessary foundation for a better and more prosperous future.

7. Methodology

The descriptive survey research design was adopted for this study. Three Local Government Areas were randomly selected, each from a senatorial district of the study area. A total of 500 respondents responded to a 12- item structured questionnaire titled “Women Participation in Grass-Root Politics and Community Development”. The questionnaire items were based on the research questions stated. Data gathered was analyzed using weighted mean.

8. Results

The results of the data analyzed are presented in the tables 1 and 2.

Research question 1

What are the barriers to women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics?

Table 1: Analysis of Barriers to Women Participation in Rivers State Grass-Root Politics

S/N	Questionnaire Item	SA(4)	A(3)	D(2)	SD(1)	Total	Mean(X)	Remark
1	Male egocentrism	175(700)	120(360)	100(200)	105(105)	500(1365)	2.73	Accepted
2	Femininity/Physiological state of women	180(720)	130(390)	100(200)	90(90)	500(1400)	2.80	Accepted
3	Economical disadvantage	300(1200)	120(360)	60(120)	20(20)	500(1700)	3.40	Accepted
4	Phobia for political vices	220(880)	130(390)	110(220)	40(40)	500(1530)	3.06	Accepted
5	Religious relics/teachings	190(760)	135(405)	95(190)	80(80)	500(1435)	2.87	Accepted
6	Cultural beliefs and value systems	198(792)	140(420)	91(182)	71(71)	500(1465)	2.93	Accepted
7	Relative illiteracy and low educational level	112(448)	115(345)	134(268)	139(139)	500(1200)	2.40	Reject
	Grand Mean						2.88	

Table 1 above, revealed that phobia for political vices, economical disadvantage, cultural beliefs and value systems, religious relics/teachings, femininity/physiological state of women and male egocentrism are barriers to women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics. Each of these items has a mean greater than 2.50 – the criterion mean. However, relative illiteracy and low educational level was not accepted as a barrier to women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics.

Research Question 2

To what extent has women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics influenced community development?

Table 2: Analysis of the Extent to which Women Participation in Rivers State Grass-Root Politics has Influenced Community Development

S/N	Questionnaire Item	SA(4)	A(3)	D(2)	SD(1)	Total	Mean (X)	Remark
8	Women participation in politics has caused enlargement of family income	176(704)	118(354)	111(222)	95(95)	500(1375)	2.75	Accepted
9	Women participation in politics has given them a sense of belonging to achievement of community goals and objectives	300(1200)	150(450)	40(80)	10(10)	500(1740)	3.48	Accepted
10	Active participation of women in politics reduces the number of unemployed women in the community	220(880)	110(330)	110(220)	60(60)	500(1490)	2.98	Accepted
11	Women participation in politics would promote policies and programmes for the advancement of women	280(1120)	120(360)	60(120)	40(40)	500(1640)	3.28	Accepted
12	Women participation in politics mobilize skills resource to improve social and economic conditions of the community	250(1000)	120(360)	60(120)	70(70)	500(1550)	3.10	Accepted
	Grand Mean						3.12	

Table 2 above, clearly shows that the five items stated as the influence of women

participation on community development were all accepted by the respondents as the mean scores were greater than the criterion mean.

9. Discussion

The analysis of data on the barriers to women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics identified economical disadvantage, phobia for political vices, cultural beliefs and value systems, religious relics/teachings, femininity/physiological state of women and male egocentrism as the likely barriers to active participation of women in Rivers State grass-root politics. Cultural beliefs and value systems as barriers to women participation in politics is in agreement with the findings of Adhiamdo-oduol (2003), Farzana (2005), and Joe (2010), which revealed that women are weaklings that cannot withstand the rough nature of the game of politics. This also agrees with the finding that femininity/physiological state of women negate their participation in politics. Economical disadvantage as a barrier to women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics is in line with Fadeiya (2005) who opined that women have no money of their own, the one they have belong to their husbands and giving the rising cost of running an effective electoral campaign, this poses serious hurdle for women in the developing countries like Nigeria.

Regardless to the barriers to women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics, the influence of women participation in Rivers State grass-root politics on community development are sense of belonging to achievement of community goals and objectives, promotion policies and programmes for women advancement and increased mobilization of skills and resource for improved social and economic conditions of the community. The findings supports Joe (2010) who submitted that the full and equitable participation of women in politics is a sign post of a number of things. Anyanwu (1992), Abasiokong (1998) and Ugochukwu (2006), stated the need to mobilize the creative energies of women for a poverty free society. Adedotun (2010), stated that empowering women economically affects the way women perceive themselves and the way they are perceived by the community, giving them the local support to enter into politics.

10. Conclusion

Women Participation in Rivers state politics is an issue of great importance. Women have been put at the background politically for years; this has engendered a consciousness of women under-representation in public life. However, the intention of most women to participate in politics is basically to support their female folk, this is their substantive responsibility and it is even on this platform that most women emerge as public office holders successfully. They use the platform of women movement as a veritable platform to seize political power and consolidate the power on this same platform. Though the rate at which women now partake in decision making process may have improved, but their active and full participation in politics is still below the prescribed 30% women inclusion by the Beijing women conference of 1995. Nevertheless, women form a formidable force to be reckoned with in community and national development.

11. Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations are made to enhance active participation of women in Rivers state grass-root politics.

- i. Sensitization and continuous creation of awareness on the need for women to be economically empowered will help arouse their participation in grass-root politics
- ii. Concerted efforts should be made to herald feminism especially by women themselves through their various social clubs and groups to be heard, seen and involved in all ventures including politics because the best advocates for women political emancipation must be women themselves.

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