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Chizoma Duru

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Chizoma Duru

Professor Nicole Maclaughlin

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The Gender War in Nigerian Politics: An analysis of the causes and repercussions of women's marginalization in Nigerian Political Spaces

I can vividly remember the day I decided what I wanted to do with my life. It was a hot day, in Lagos, Nigeria, the power was out and the only thing keeping us sane despite the heat was the cool breeze seeping through the windows near the dining table. There I sat, excited that my favorite food, mouth watering jollof rice was going to be served, as I chatted with my father who always sat at the head of the table. In our schools, career fairs had started and conversations around selecting a high school concentration had begun. "Dad, one day I'm going to be president, and we will always have electricity", I declared pertaining to our conversation about what I wanted to do with my future. "Ha, is that a joke?" he mocked. "Jobs like that aren't for young women, rather you should consider nursing or coming to work for me in my company", he continued further attempting to demolish my dream of being a national changemaker. One can imagine the tears that followed as I excused myself from the table. I was inconsolable for the rest of the day.

My interactions with my father wounded my heart, but my conversations pertaining to my potential presidency with others broke it. Instead of receiving the encouragement I had expected concerning my political career ambitions, I was greeted with sighs and exclamations followed with sentences similar to "A pretty girl like you has no space in politics", "Politics is a man's sports" and worst of all "I believe first lady looks better on you". Then I realized that the

problem wasn't my dad, my teachers or the religious leaders in my church that didn't render their support, it was the whole system that had no faith in the girl child.

Upon these experiences, it is no shock to me that the Federal Republic of Nigeria currently serves as 44th out of 54 countries in Africa, in terms of women's representation in government, with an abysmal 3.61% of their parliament seats (29 out of 469) allocated to women (Statista, 2021). As seen in the graph, these statistics were on an incredibly slow increase from the year's 1999 till 2011, until the numbers began to decrease to where we are in today's government. Due to these discouraging statistics, I ask: What are the causes and repercussions of Nigerian women's marginalization in government?

Figure 1:

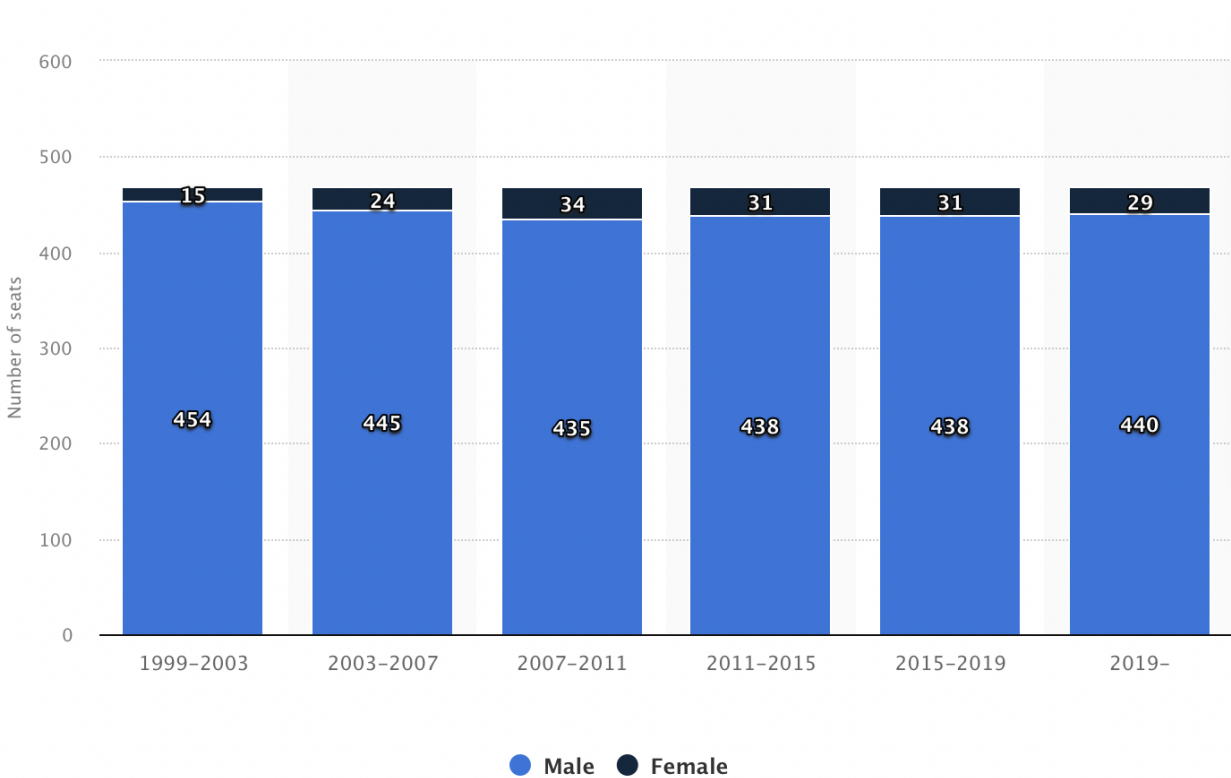


Fig 1: Statistics of Women's Seats in government over the years (Statista, 2021)

It is heartbreaking that Nigeria, a country that is made up of 106,546,413 women out of a total population of 215,845,994 people (49.4%) (country meters, 2022), does not have more women in one of the most pivotal parts of society, the government. As such, it comes as no shock that Nigeria ranked 128 out of 195 countries according to the World Gender gap index which directly pertains to political, economic and educational opportunities available to women (country economy, 2020). Especially when over 60% of the 14 million children that are out of school in Nigeria are females (Center for African Justice, Peace and Human Rights, 2021) due to child marriages, patriarchy, traditional preferences and other equality stunting phenomena. These perfectly correspond with the facts that only 57.4% of women are present in the labor force (BLS Reports, 2021) and over 60% of Nigerians under the poverty level are women (IMF, 2020) . The unfortunate circumstances are the genesis of the problems that lead to a scarcity of female political leaders, and the men in power seem to be less concerned about such statistics as we notice a continuous deterioration in these already disappointing numbers. So who is going to look out for these women? Women, themselves.

As a young teenager, I began to ponder over why a country popularly known as the “Giant of Africa”, would have such backwards stances on women partaking in governmental affairs. Defying the status quo, I began to probe into people’s thoughts and question them on their stances concerning women’s involvement in Politics. More often than not, I was disappointed with the outcomes of such conversations. The religious leaders in my community forcefully used the bible as a defense for why female politicians do not align with “ways of God”. My teachers in school tirelessly advised that there were many other jobs a woman could do, but the presidency is “unlady-like”. My aunties at home lamented that they were tired of instructing me to stop asking such questions and look towards marrying a good man that could

take care of me. Fortunately, this made me even more engrossed in the causal factors that lead to this continuous marginalization of women in Nigeria's government today.

Upon my observations, I noticed that one of the paramount reasons for such segregation are the strong cultural and religious norms that seem to have Nigeria in a choke hold. Nigeria, as a very religious and culturally aware state, unsurprisingly, houses citizens that are victims of the stereotypes and gender roles that are portrayed by said norms. Many of these proclamations are made by various Nigerian ethnic groups. An example is :“Okpoho Anya enwe mbana ezi”, meaning a woman can not head a family in Igbo language. Moreover, many religious institutions use biblical decrees such as “ Wives submit yourselves to your husband... for a husband has authority over his wife” (Ephesians 5 21-33). These declarations are often used as fortification for the demeaning gender stereotypes that constrain women to subordinacy. The normalization of gender stereotypes continuously prevent members of society from seeing women in instructive and decision- making positions such as political occupations. Thus leading to the large rates of female marginalization we see in government today.

Additionally, these gender norms cause capacity gaps between the genders which make it even more difficult for women to aspire to high positions in the country. Damilola Agbalojobi, a Nigerian political analyst and gender specialist, buttressed these points during her interview with “The Conversation Nigeria”. She highlighted the inability of most women to even afford to stand for political positions due to the “exorbitant costs of mandatory expression of interest and nomination forms required by all political parties” (Agbalojobi, 2021). Agbalojobi's claims were well founded as according to the Nigerian National Bureau of statistics 2021, a woman's average pay in Nigeria is 58% of a man's. These statistics coupled with women's “poor access to education, the unpaid labor, unequal inheritance rights and and outright discrimination”, also

mean that women are more unlikely to be financially or mentally equipped to hold political seats. This automatically rules a large percentage of women out from candidacy due to unaffordability and mentally decinditions them from such aspirations.

This mental deconditioning even happens within the school communities, which many female children are not privileged enough to behold. Even in one of the most prestigious private institutions in the state, I still experienced an education that prepared me to be solely a care-taker and abscond from the practices of a go-getter. I still hear the words narrated from my Social Studies and Home Economics textbooks that counseled that a mum's responsibilities were to stay at home and take care of the children, while it was the father who was taxed with the heavy lifting of "getting a job" and "providing for the family". Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, hints at this in her feature of Beyonce's "Flawless" when she states " We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller... we say to girls you can be successful but not too successful otherwise you will threaten the man, because I am female i am expected to aspire to marriage" (Adichie, 2014). The inability of many Nigerian women to see themselves in positions of authority, due to such discouragement, is a causal factor in women's political marginalization. As such, this manipulation leads even women to believe that female candidates or female political aspirants are demolishing societal structures and absconding their "traditional roles" in society.

As a young girl bred in Nigeria, this mental deconditioning arose from various industries, including the media industry. The media continuously fails to give appropriate media coverage to female political candidates, especially in comparison to their male counterparts. This was well observed in the 2015 elections when following the media coverage granted between 3 candidates: President Muhammodu Buhari (All Progressive Congress Party, male), Former President Goodluck Jonathan (People's Democratic Party, male) and Professor Remi Sonaiya (

KOWA party, female). In this election the media coverage for these three parties in the two biggest newspapers in Nigeria (This Day and The Guardian), was a whopping 190 stories and interviews in the month of February, alone, according to the totals in the table below. Under the PDP column (G. Jonathan), it is observable that they attained a total of 109 news covers, which attributed to 57%, and under the APC columns (M.Buhari), it is evident that APC gathered a total of 79 covers of which attributed to 41.5%. Unfortunately, their female counterpart of the KP party, R. Sonaiya only received 2 covers in total, which equated to 2% of the total coverage received by candidates (Ekeh, 60). Despite the fact that APC and PDP are majority parties in the state, scholars argue that the coverage granted to Sonaiya was by far lower than the usual rates of male candidates in other minority parties (Ekeh, 60). This huge divergence between the representation of female candidates in media is a huge contributor to the lack of public confidence that potential female candidates experience within the society and a cause of the marginalization that this paper is centered around. If these women are not able to gain an adequate platform to introduce themselves to their citizens, how will Nigerians ever be convinced about the capabilities of female leaders?

Figure 2:

Table 1: THISDAY Newspaper

Date Feb. 2015	Frequency G. Jonathan	Frequency M. Buhari	Frame G. Jonathan	Frame Buhari	Prominence G. Jonathan	Prominence M. Buhari	KOWA R. S.
1.	4	5	3	3	4	3	Nil
2	Nil	6	Nil	3	Nil	6	Nil
3	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
4	3	3	2	1	3	3	Nil
5	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
6	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
7	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
8	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
9	8	2	6	2	8	2	Nil
10	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
11	4	2	2	2	2	2	Nil
12	1	5	Nil	2	1	5	Nil
13	Nil	1	Nil	1	Nil	1	Nil
14	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
15	3	Nil	Nil	3	Nil	Nil	Nil
16	Nil	2	Nil	1	Nil	2	Nil
17	1	1	Nil	Nil	1	1	Nil
18	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
19	3	2	-	1	3	2	Nil
20	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
21	Nil	1	Nil	Nil	Nil	1	Nil
22	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
23	10	3	3	23	10	Nil	Nil
24	Nil	1	Nil	Nil	1	Nil	Nil
25	1		1	Nil	1	Nil	Nil
26	2	2	Nil	2	2	2	Nil
27	1	2	1	2	1	2	Nil
28	5	2	4	1	5	2	Nil
29							
30							
Total	46	40	24	44	44	35	0

Table 2: Guardian Newspapers

Date Feb. 2015	Frequency G. Jonathan	Frequency M. Buhari	Frame G. Jonathan	Frame M. Buhari	Prominence G. Jonathan	Prominence M. Buhari	Other KOWA
1.	1	6	1	2	1	6	Nil
2	1	1	1	-	1	Nil	Nil
3	2	4	2	2	1	3	Nil
4	8	5	4	3	4	5	Nil
5	4	2	4	1	4	2	Nil
6	3	1	2	1	2	1	Nil
7	2	1	2	1	2	1	Nil
8	1	1	1	1	1	1	Nil
9	3	1	2	Nil	2	1	Nil
10	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
11	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
12	3	2	2	2	3	2	Nil
13	Nil	2	Nil	1	Nil	2	Nil
14	1	Nil	1	Nil	1	Nil	Interview
15	1	Nil	Nil	Nil	1	Nil	Interview
16	4	1	2	1	4	1	Nil
17	1	Nil	Nil	Nil	1	Nil	Nil
18	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
19	4	2	1	1	4	1	Nil
20	1	1	1	Nil	1	1	Nil
21	1	1	1	Nil	1	1	Nil
22	7	1	2	Nil	4	1	Nil
23	4	2	2	1	3	1	Nil
24	2	3	1	Nil	2	3	Nil
25	4	Nil	Nil	Nil	3	Nil	Nil
26	3	Nil	2	Nil	1	Nil	Nil
27	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
28	2	2	2	2	2	2	Nil
29							
30							
Total	63	39	36	19	49	35	2

Fig 2: Reports of Media Coverages for the 2015 Presidential candidates (Ekeh,62)

These factors prevent the benefits of women's involvement in Nigerian politics from being materialized. With a close to equal percentage of the population being female, it is cardinal that Nigeria represents this demographic and begins to establish a "balance of power between the genders" (Olagbegi,2021). In line with the United Nations Sustainable goal 5, which is to "Achieve Gender Equality and empower all women and girls", it is of utmost importance that the equitable involvement of both men and women are recognized in a state's political structure to ensure human, socio-political and economic development in democracies. Women also need to have a seat at the table, in order to advocate for themselves in terms of health care, education, policy establishment and other pivotal aspects of society. These would be essential in closing the gender gaps and ensuring women's development and empowerment in the country. As such the repercussions of an increase in women's political involvement would improve gender equality and women's empowerment, gender balance and representation and national development and sustainability.

To achieve such prowess, I believe that Nigeria should adopt certain policies that have enabled its sister countries on the continent to achieve an adequate gender balance in government. Starting with the adoption of affirmative action, through quota systems, that was undertaken by Rwanda and The Republic of South Africa. In Rwanda, women have been allocated 30% of electoral seats, on a national level, since the implementation of their 2003 constitution. This has led to continuous involvement of women in their political spaces, with over 61.3% of the Rwandan government consisting of women (statista, 2021). Additionally, In the Republic of South Africa, the leading party, the African National Congress (ANC) adopted a 50% voluntary party quota in favor of women in 2006, in accordance with the Municipal

Structures Act 1998 required that parties “seek to ensure that 50% of the candidates on the party list are women, and that women and men candidates are evenly distributed though (sic) the list.” (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2022). These implementations paved the way for South Africa’s 46.4% of women in parliament as of 2021 (Statista, 2021). Although national affirmative action implementations are crucial in women’s success in the Gender war in politics, I believe that this alone will lack effectiveness. Nigeria would need to accomplish these quota implementations with checks and balances, within the government to ensure that these quotas are actually accomplished, and are not just included to appease concerned citizens. Furthermore the introduction of political training towards women, media reconstructions towards their approach in the portrayal of female candidates and financial support to encourage affordability and access to political seats would all buttress the attempts of seeking more female representation in governance. In the long run, Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, a former finance minister in the Nigerian government states that Nigeria needs “to start at an early age to instill into boys and young men that they can actually be actors in terms of making sure that women get their fair share of attention and opportunities.”, in order to ensure that men also make room for women to gain a seat at the table in Nigeria. This could potentially be included in an educational reformation plan which also aims to correct the gender norms of subordination that current educational material impose on female students.

In fact, some do argue that these affirmative action practices may have increased the number of women appearing in national parliaments, but fail to actually improve women’s empowerment, socio-economic improvement and human development. Hence the reason why 25% of women present in the provincial governance in Kwazulu Natal area in South Africa, have been unable to cater for the needs of their female locals, specifically those residing in rural

communities (Isike and Uzodike, 2011). Additionally, despite the record-breaking presence of women in the Rwandan government, there are still cultural and religious concerns limiting gender equality which many women in political positions bear the brunt of. Some of these concerns were shared by Claudette Mukamana, the District Vice Mayor of Social Affairs in Rwanda when she shared “ When people see you holding any of those [elected] positions as women, the very first question asked by everyone is: Will she be able to perform her duties? Is she capable of holding such a position?” at the United Nations training for Women in Governance in 2018. Another political figure, Berthilde Muruta, the Executive Secretary in the Rubavu District added that “Even attending such training, there are people who think that we come to meet men, or for other business, which makes it hard to be trusted by our husbands,”.

Although these indications at first seem to disprove the effectiveness of women’s representations to the opposition, a closer look reveals that they are primary reasons why the advocacy for this cause is crucial. Firstly, both Rwanda and South Africa have experienced significant increases in gender equality indicators. A Large majority of South Africans say that boys and girls have an equal chance at getting an education (83%) and that women and men have an equal chance to earn an income (77%) and to own or inherit land (76%). Men and women differ little in their assessments of these opportunities (Afrobarometer, 2019). Moreover, in line with the increase of women in the Rwandan Government, they have been able to achieve incredible milestones, with 49.24% of tertiary education students being women (Trading Economics, 2022) and with the labor force participation rate of women being 51.59% (Trading Economics, 2022). Additionally, if these setbacks were apparent, they would be as a result of the cultural/ religious perceptions of women that I previously highlighted. Thus, this evidence

suggests that perceiving more women in instructive positions would be a great step towards curtailing such unfounded gender norms.

As a much older woman now, my research has proved to me that a lot of work needs to be done to ensure that girls like Chizoma, who have big political dreams, are not faced with the same criticism I experienced. Due to the cultural and religious norms that perpetuate gender inequality, the capacity gaps that economically and educationally demote women's abilities to run for office, the mental manipulation perpetuated by educators and educational material and the unfair discrimination of female political candidates by the media, Nigerian women continue to lack representation in the government. Thus, women are subjected to lower standards of living than their male counterparts because they lack a national voice. As such, it is extremely urgent that the current people in power, who are mostly male, fight this gender war for women's inclusion in government. They need to use their platform to encourage affirmative action plans, similar to more developed African countries, ensure these plans are followed through checks and balances and work to curtail these gender norms through re-education of Nigeria's people. I have no doubt that if these legislative measures, educational reformation strategies and political training programs are implemented, they will produce groundbreaking results in terms of all-round national development. They would be rendering little girls, like my younger self, the chance to dream, work and plan towards executing transformational changes in the country.

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