

**GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND MARGINALISATION
IMPLICATION FOR POLITICAL STABILITY AND
DEVELOPMENT**

by

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The last census in Nigeria claimed that the population of men in the country is slightly larger than that of women. Very few people believe this. This is because this contradicts the general norm all over the world. Medical scientists have argued that even if there is parity at birth between males and females, the mortality rate of male children is higher than those of females apparently because of physiological reasons and also because of the life style of adolescent males. Also because men carry more family responsibilities and subject themselves to more physical and psychological exertion, they seem to wither away faster than their female counterparts. The result of this is that, in most societies women are more than men numerically. It will therefore be safe to suggest that at any given point in time there are more women than men in most countries including Nigeria in spite of whatever the national census board says.

This is why the question of gender discrimination and marginalisation of women is statistically important. The issue of marginalisation has become a recurrent topic in our national life. Sometimes this issue is perceived but may not be real, but the perception is all that is important to create problems for the polity. Ethnic marginalisation is of course real and it is not a preserve of any one particular ethnic group. Some may feel

marginalised politically, others, economically, some will refer to socio-cultural indices of education and information as being totally weighted against their groups. Others point to apparent domination of the coercive organs of state power by some ethnic groups as being most unacceptable because all other consideration of national life hinge on this. Whatever the case may be the end result of perceived marginalisation is personal unhappiness leading to disorientation at the personal level and mutual dislike if not outright hatred of other ethnic groups, leading to political incoherence, disunity, instability, discordance, disequilibrium and under development.

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While one can argue about which ethnic group is more marginalised than the others, there is no debate as to which gender is more discriminated against. Women have generally not had the same opportunities which men have had in this country over time. The three predominant faiths and religious tendencies in this country support discriminatory practices against women. The Judeo-Christian beliefs seem to give less recognition to women. It is still a rarity in various Christian denomination to give full authority to ordained women priests. There is also a pedestal beyond which they can not expect to go. Even though the religion of Islam technically does not preach the inferiority of women, the way the religion has been

practised over time has led to the relegation of women. Some would say this is because Islam in Nigeria as well as in other parts of the world has had to carry the cultural baggage of the milieu in which it is rooted. Whatever the case may be, women have not fared very well in the Islamic areas of Nigeria. The few Nigerians who do not subscribe to these two monotheistic religions have perhaps been worst in their world view of women. Traditional religion view women almost as half devils half children. Women were not to be led into sacred beliefs and secrets of society. They were excluded from politics which was invariably ritualised. They could not become rulers or important chiefs, the only avenue open to them was buying and selling and participation in market organisation and politics. Although in our various societies, we do have stories of heroic sacrifices and activities of women, but their rights were severely circumscribed by the fact that secret societies from which they were largely excluded play significant executive roles in traditional African societies.

The cultural milieu in which our womenfolk function in Nigeria is gender biased. This is not to suggest that big strides have not been made in the struggle for gender equality. There are no constitutional obstacles for women to aspire to any posts, elective or appointive in Nigeria. And unlike in many countries in the Western world, women in Nigeria earn equal

salaries with men, occupying same positions. There is hardly any profession in Nigeria, requiring no unusual physical power, that one will not find Nigerian women. It is even arguable whether women play more dominant role in the economy at least at the retail level than men. There have been women Vice-Chancellors, Professors, Generals in the military, Judges, Commissioners of Police, Pilots, Doctors, Lawyers, Engineers, etc. I do not know if there are women Hangmen, Grave diggers and other usually less favoured professions. What women usually complain about is not accessibility but that the quantum of women in these positions do not reflect their demographic strength. The reason for this short coming is because in the past parents placed more premium on their male children and did not consider it worthwhile to invest their hard earned money on women education. This was because it was felt that the place of the women was in the kitchen, the Church and with children! But this retrogressive and unprogressive thinking belongs to the past. Most parents who can afford it, do not discriminate in their educational priorities against their female children. If this is the case in the urban areas, the villages and the rural areas still lag behind. One is more likely to find more female-children hawking wares on the streets than male children in the villages. Young girls are still given in marriage after a few years or no years at all of schooling.

The phenomenon of child marriages are still too rampant and too frequent for comfort. The various tiers of governments in Nigeria have come strongly against this. In some states, single gender schools are created to encourage female education. There are also laws against withdrawal of children for early marriage in many states. But unfortunately the economic down turn in the country has impacted more on female enrolment in schools in many parts of the country. There is of course the unusual phenomenon of more female children in schools in Anambra and Imo States. This I dare say is not the norm. When faced with choice in the face of dwindling economic resources between educating a female or male child, the preference is usually for the latter. This makes sense to the people making the choice because it is erroneously perceived that the girls can easily find husbands whereas a man without education and a job would hardly be found attractive by the opposite sex. And if the family tree must continue these people feel they should invest on their male children.

This kind of choice should never have been allowed in the first instance if the state were aware and alive to its responsibilities. Education should be a right and not a privilege. The resources to take care of the education of all of our children are there if properly managed and husbanded. In the best of times, female education should be at par with that

of their male counter part. In the Universities for example the ratio is about 40:60 in favour of men. This means that parity is within site. If and when we have almost equal number of women and men vying for the same position, inequality would not disappear because employers of labour would continue to view materially the loss of labour and corporate earning which leave with or without pay associated with child bearing entails. But these are issues which are being tackled in more advanced economies where men too are being given paternity leave just like the maternity leave for the women. Discrimination in the job market will never be completely eliminated but it can at least be made illegal. In Nigeria the legal situation is that discrimination is illegal but since nobody has ever forced the issue we still do not know what the opinions of our courts are.

It is in the realm of politics that the situation is very serious. Women in Nigeria hardly show any interest in politics. The more educated women are, the more their aversion for politics. They just want to be left alone to go on with their lives, and take care of their families. Educated women and the majority of their male counter parts actually view politics as a “dirty game” which is largely played by lawyers and other self employed professionals. And because of the usual violence and thuggery associated with partisan party politics, women and self respecting men shy away from

it. There is also the problem of finance. Politics in recent times have become a preserve of the plutocrats. One cannot be a successful politician in Nigeria unless one is well heeled or one has backers who are ready to finance one's political career as an investment. In this way one compromises one's independence and the seed of corruption is sown. Women generally do not seem cut out for this kind of life. There is also the question of what an aspiring woman politician is to do with a husband who is apathetic or hostile to political participation. The general impression of a woman politician in the minds of Nigerians is that of somebody who is either out of control or out of her station. We know of course that the families of women politicians all over the world have to give up their hold, expectation, demands and the usual familial relationship, but it is not easy in rather conservative African society as ours for this to be done without somebody paying the price. That price is usually paid by the women and the children, because the man is usually not inhibited in entering into new liaison with other more 'homely' and 'wifely' partner. These cultural obstacles are immense and difficult to overcome. But we must overcome them. We have a national aspiration to be in the league of important and civilised countries of the world. We must therefore march in tandem with the best. It is not a matter of religion any more. We have had women serving at the highest

levels of government every where except Africa. Golda Meier in Israel, the Bandaranaiques - mother and daughter-in Sri Lanka, Indira Ghandi in India, Begum Hussaina Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh, Tansu Ciller in Turkey, Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain, Magot Brundlandt in Norway, Benezir Bhutto in Pakistan and there is the possibility of Megawati Sukar Noputra becoming the next president of Indonesia the biggest Islamic country in the world next year. Religious and male chauvinists have and are being confounded every where. It is not a question of whether it will be salutary for women to participate and to take the commanding heights in governance, it is a question of equity, fairness and justice.

One cannot identify a pattern, norm or paradigm in countries where women have been heads of governments or countries. But what is discernible is that women tend to be more authoritarian than men perhaps because they have to assert themselves more than it is necessary for men to do. The level of corruption is not less than when men are in power. From empirical data there is hardly any difference in the way women or men behave in power. Perhaps the only trait one can isolate, is that women in power seem to feel like men and to put other women at a distance. Whatever the shortcomings of women in power, the absence of the

feminine touch wherever they are barred from participation is definitely a loss to the polity and society at large.

Since the Beijing conference on women empowerment, the United Nations and the collective voice of the world has stood behind women self realisation in every facet of our human existence. It therefore behoves us to ensure that our women-folk has access to political power as their men counterpart. As a resource, man or woman is the ultimate factor in human development. A country that marginalises half of her population has definitely shot herself in the foot and cannot run as fast as other healthy nations. This is particularly unfortunate for a backward country where all hands should be on the deck. There is no scientific evidence to suggest that women are less cerebrally endowed than men. This means denying women equal rights and opportunity denies our government the full pool from which it makes its recruitment. Without the right calibre of people manning the strategic centres of our life, there can be no development and without development there can hardly be political and economic stability. Therefore we must borrow a leaf from such countries in the Scandinavia, Germany, France and Great Britain where there is no longer a debate on a woman's role in the political and economic life of a country.

The question to ask is whether the marginalisation of women has been responsible for our apparent and seeming instability in Nigeria. The answer is NO. Our instability arises for now from monopolisation of power by the military and marginalisation of the entire civil society which includes women. Our instability also arises from regional political imbalance, inequitable distribution of resources and national wealth, rampant corruption, youth unemployment, brigandage arising from joblessness, absence of rule of law, social disequilibrium, arrested political and economic development, confusion as to the system and mode of government, marriage of modern and ancient political systems without a clear cut direction and evolution of a Nigerian system. While the problem of gender discrimination is a serious issue it is not the most important factor making for instability and under-development. It is nevertheless a serious issue and it must be tackled along with the other issues. Associated with gender discrimination is the issue of sexual harassment which is usually laughed off the court in Nigeria. But this is not a laughing matter. No country that wants to be taken seriously would condone the offence of sexual harassment which is endemic in Nigeria. Because of the poverty of our people and the scarcity of jobs, female workers put up with

indescribable humiliation in the hands of over-sexed men with unusually active libido.

Now that we are at the threshold of a democratic era, each of the new political parties must begin to formulate policies especially directed at female and children issues. The military governments that have dominated our national life since 1966 have been quite sensitive to women issues. There is the general saying that military officers see their wives as being one rank above themselves. Whether this is true or not, military people, as officers and gentlemen have largely been forward looking on the issues of women. They have been more insistent on educating the female-child especially in the Northern parts of our country. They have also sometimes invoked draconian measures against child-marriages. In recent times, policies championed by the wives of military heads of state have been directed at raising the issue of women discrimination as worthy of national discourse. Shorn of its sometimes frivolous trappings and tendencies, the wives of the military leaders in recent times have forced the issue of special agencies and ministries charged with alleviating the problems of women to be on the national agenda.

Politicians because they have had little chance at political leadership have not demonstrated forceful leadership in this regard. It is hoped that

the coming political dispensation would take more interest in women issues and women empowerment and political participation. It may be necessary to embark on affirmative action to allocate a certain percentage of seats to women in the various legislatures and the cabinets. Political parties in their own interest must allow and encourage women to hold party political offices as well. Perhaps there is a need for a constitutional device to force men to share power with women. The question of franchise has been legally and constitutionally settled. And there is no democracy anywhere in the world where people are forced to vote. But in our own situation where quite a large number of our womenfolk live in purdah, special and ingenious devices must be fashioned out to ensure the confidentiality of the franchise. Under no circumstance must it be permissible for men to dictate to their wives who to vote for. With modern communication it ought to be possible for political parties looking for votes to reach the most distant recess of the purdah. There is the general knowledge that when a nation educates its womenfolk that nation is educating the entire society because of the fundamental and important role women play in child bearing and rearing and continuing and preserving human society.

If our goal is to build a vibrant democratic society, then all people must be brought on board and if we must move at a very rapid rate in order

to catch up with the civilised world then the question of women mobilisation is just too important to be trifled with. Without stability there can be no development, with more than half of our population operating at the fringe of our political life, we cannot be said to be politically stable. Stability is not the same as the peace of the grave, where society is terrorised into acquiescence or to silence. While women may not be in a position to terrorise society or to overthrow governments, their power lies in the influence which they have over their male children and their husbands. We must recognise this influence as power and we must deliberately educate such a segment of our society who will always have this power. But above all, women power must not come vicariously through their sons and husbands, women must have access to power on their own merit. The only way to ensure this is by deliberately making our political environment women friendly. This we can do through affirmative action and through legislation. We must also proceed with deliberate speed in educating the female-child. Education has always been a liberating force and as well as a training process and medium. With education most of the disabilities of women will over time disappear. Economic empowerment will follow, and with this will come political participation or vice versa. With women empowerment will come more voice and brain to confront other

fundamental disabilities of our nation. Unity is strength, the more united a country is, the better, unity goes beyond overcoming the permordial ties of ethnicity. Nowadays, gender unity is increasing attracting the attention that it deserves. It may even be more fruitful and more intellectually rewarding if we move away from preoccupation with ethnic and regional politics and really face the socio-economic issues of our times. What better people to look at the issue of begging, in the midst of plenty, starvation, unclean environment, inadequate health facilities than women. Examples of countries like Russia, where more than sixty per cent of the doctors are women or the United States where most of the people who do social work are women point to tendency of women to be more suitable in building what President Bush called a 'gentler and kinder' and more humane society. Our women need to be challenged and our society must embrace the credo of "careers open to talents" and women certainly have talents.

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