

PATRONAGE AND TOKENISM: THE BANE OF GENDER JUSTICE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper seeks to investigate the so-called 'battle' for gender parity in Nigeria in order to determine the propriety or otherwise of such a 'battle'. It also examines the theoretical method adopted by advocates of gender equity and the potency of the method in achieving the goal of the agitation for equal treatment of the sexes. Can this battle be won by mass action, quota system, discriminatory treatment, or should the elite woman class aspire upwards and thereafter 'pull up' other women? How, thus far, have the few privileged Nigerian women been supportive of the less privileged members of their ranks? Is this 'battle' a class struggle meant to favour only a select few elite women in Nigeria? In waging a gender war, can individual merit and desert be ignored or foreclosed? Should this agitation allow the cultivation and development of an individual potentials and initiatives to be sacrificed at the altar of gender or collective interests? Finally, the belief that some women will always be called upon to fill their quota under any administration negates the spirit of the struggle for gender balancing in the country.

Keywords: Fair competition; Gender parity; Political education; Pauperisation; Patronage; Tokenism; Will power.

Introduction

...What count as equal rights for women or for ethnic and cultural minorities cannot even be understood adequately until members of these groups articulate and justify in public discussion on what is relevant to equal and unequal treatment in typical cases (Amy Gutmann, 1994, p. ix)

Much has been said and heard on the alleged marginalisation of women in public life in Nigeria, and perhaps much more will still be said on this issue in the days to come. This paper tries to understand the moral justification of sharing public offices on the basis of gender affiliation. Patronage here is understood as a situation in which some women are called upon by male-dominated administration, whenever it is politically expedient, to fill-up some posts or offices as a matter of good-will or kind gesture. On the other hand, by tokenism is meant a mere expression of appreciation for the support received, a call-up to fill available quotas for gender or geographical balancing, an invitation not based on the quality and qualification but one

that is meant to balance appointment between the two sexes. In the meantime, Nigerian women are not yet seen (indeed they do not see themselves) as qualified to be governors of their respective states, but they can be 'selected' as deputy governors. This pathetic scenario is clearly demonstrated by these women, when, in their hundreds, they pay solidarity visits to elected governors (usually men) to thank them for 'choosing some of us as...', and this is coming from the same group of people who are 'fighting gender war'!

Nigerian women elite class would be making a serious mistake if they hinge the emancipation of members of their fold on the number of those selected or appointed to public or political offices. Even if the ratio of such appointments is seen as heartening in relation to men's, yet the question of how such women got to where they are now cannot be brushed aside. For instance, did the few privileged women attain their current social statuses through fair competition with their male counterpart, or were they 'granted, chosen or called-up' to take such responsibilities? As a result of this act of patronage coupled with vote rigging, Nigerians have witnessed a female professional hair-dresser emerging as a speaker of parliament, while a sewing mistress (fashion designer) also found her way to the national assembly, all in the name of gender balancing! Rather than depending on uncritical balancing, a lot is likely to be achieved if contemporary Nigerian women leaders would design programmes that would promote female education and political awareness and consciousness. However, it is to be added that such political consciousness is not tantamount to holding political offices. Oftentimes, leaders of women groups are apt to count women ministers, those in Senate, House of Representatives, Commissioners, deputy governors, local government chairpersons, and the rest, as positive signs of women emancipation, not minding the fact that most of these appointees are at the mercy of those who appointed them. Public offices demand public trust, ideas and ideals and should not be an all-comer affair which is to be 'rationed-out' on the basis of gender equation. In addition, it is patently illogical to think that gender gap may be bridged simply by relying on the good will of those believed to have created such gap in the first place. A more radical and pragmatic approach will be required, and as arguments in this paper thus far have shown, affirmative action, quota system, gender balancing, and the rest, would be mere palliative. Women must strive for quality education in all fields of human endeavour. First and foremost, they must see themselves as humans capable of competing favourably with their male counterpart. Having attained the requisite education and cognate experience, then they will be in a position to challenge any form of domination. Such a challenge would be seen as healthy and different from begging for spaces in both government and civil and public service.

In Nigeria, women enjoy more patronage in ceremonial matters. Women are often organised (indeed, they organise themselves), dressed in flashy and expensive attires to decorate political rallies and campaign venues. This is what is often erroneously referred to as political awareness or emancipation. In that context, Nigerian women are said, in the local parlance, to have 'arrived'. The case of Mrs. Sarah Jubrin explains better the point we are making here. Jubrin attempted three times to be President of the federal republic. On each occasion she was widely rejected, the worst came during her third attempt when she was not given a single vote in their party's primaries. But she was later 'appointed' as an adviser on ethics and value by President Goodluck Jonathan, and this political gesture was hailed through the length and breadth of Nigeria! In addition, women politicians in the country rely and depend so much on the good-will of the so-called 'First ladies'. And to say the least, these first ladies wield much power in Nigeria's polity. They have become so powerful such that elected representatives of the people will have to seek their favour if they intend to get attention from their husbands! Some political watchers have even argued that, as a matter of fact, some, if not most, of the women who come out to vie for elective posts are mere comedians, people who, *ab initio*, either do not have requisite qualification for such posts, or are not indeed serious about their publicly declared intentions or ambitions. Their main objective, according to Critics, is to express their intention in order to be considered for one post or the other thereafter.

Politics should be seen as a serious business or profession, something that equally requires serious minded practitioners. Even though the road to political emancipation may be rough, yet female politicians in Nigeria must give it whatever it requires to get to their political destination. Allocation of offices to women by elected male politicians is an act of pauperisation. Such clichés as ‘give women a chance to rule’, ‘support Nigerian women emancipation in politics’, ‘Women in Nigeria, arise’, ‘Reserve X% of public offices for women’, and the rest of them, have not help matters. Ironically, the chance which these women are looking for is firmly in their hands; namely, their voting power as a result of their numerical strength. But, more often than not, women in Nigeria did not usually vote for female contestants. However, they always complain of marginalisation and thereafter demand preferential consideration in political matters!

II

Some critics may see our arguments in this paper thus far to be one-sided, namely, that it ignores the strong points of the arguments of those who advocate some degree of preferential treatment for women as a result of their nature and position in the society. We will now consider, briefly, some of the arguments in support of giving special consideration to Nigerian women in matters of economic, political, national policies and programmes. Our argument has been that the politics of recognition is meant to value and appreciate the worth of each and every person, and not to share political offices on equal or proportional basis between the sexes. The paper believes that such political devices as politics of difference, difference blindness, as well as reverse discrimination which have either been advocated, defended, or rejected by such political philosophers as John Rawls (2001), Charles Taylor (1994), and others, are not intended for a particular sex. Rather, they are policies designed as temporary measures to assist initially disadvantaged groups to stand on their feet and fight for their whatever rights. A full discussion of these policies cannot however be discussed here since they are intended to be the topic of another paper. Suffice to say, however, that the contents of the above mentioned policies do not confer on women, any women, an over-night title of ‘professional politicians’. There is always a learning period in all professions, and the best way to learn is not to start from the demand for topmost offices in the land. Happily though, women themselves have begun to realise that the demand for preferential treatment is not the panacea to women’s poor showing in politics.

... Women need not seek recognition as women (our emphasis), but as humans possessing qualities that are worthy of universal recognition (Susan Wolf, Multiculturalism, op. Cit., p.30)

It is also heart-warming to note that some Nigerian women are not happy being treated like a pet or pampered child. This class of women are interested in protecting their fundamental human rights, an interest not to be hinged on being given political offices. Hear one of such Nigerian women.

I don’t believe in tokenism, I’d rather clamour for equal opportunities for the sexes. For instance, i don’t want to be given an opportunity simply because of my sex, but because it’s been proven that I’m capable of handling the responsibility. Also, i don’t want to be debarred from opportunities and education because I’m a woman. (Hon. Abike Dabiri-Erewa, member, House of Representatives; in Women of Valour: Jewels of the Future, p.8)

Dabiri-Erewa adds that it is not the case that only men discriminate against women. She cites her personal bitter experience in the hands of a female general manager while working with the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA).

As Gutmann (op. Cit. P.6) also rightly observes, people are unique self-creating and creative individuals. In the particular case of the Nigerian women in politics, they hardly deserve special treatment since they are not prevented from expressing their political choices through the principle of one man, woman,

boy, girl, one vote. This ability and freedom to vote can put them in plum political positions since they are believed to be more in number than males. However, the loud call for special and preferential treatment appears not to open their eyes to the option of using their superior number to their advantage. One cannot but agree with the view that:

Women in particular societies have been induced to adopt a depreciatory image of themselves. They have internalised a picture of their own inferiority, so that even when some of the obstacles to their advancement fall away, they may be incapable of taking advantage of the new opportunities (Charles Taylor, op. Cit., p.25)

It should be stressed that this paper is not opposed to preferential treatment at all cost, rather it holds that in the case of the Nigerian women, she does not deserve such treatment since she has all it takes to be what she wants to be. The relevant question is: if women are given the political offices simply because they are women, are we to believe that the demands of such offices will be jointly executed by women groups, thereby sharing the honour, blame and responsibility? The answer is in the negative. For instance, even when the late motivational speaker and African American civil rights campaigner, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was advocating freedom and equal rights for the negroes in his country, something similar to women's demand for political recognition in contemporary Nigeria, he nonetheless recognised the importance of training and education of the blacks. For Martin Luther King Jr.:

It is impossible to create a formula for the future which does not take into account that our society has been doing something special against the Negro for hundreds of years. How then can he be absorbed into the mainstream of American life if we do not do something special for him now in order to balance the equation and equip him to compete on a just and equal basis? (Martin Luther King Jr., A Testament of Hope, 2008, p.46)

The above quoted passage appears to support Nigerian women's agitation for preferential treatment, but that is only on the surface level. King Jr. did not forget to add that such an advocacy was not asking the American Negroes to fold their arm while expecting the government to do everything for them. He adds:

In asking for something special, the Negro is not seeking charity. He does not want to languish on welfare rolls any more than the next man. He does not want to be given a job he cannot handle. Neither, however, does he want to be told that there is no place where he can be trained to handle it. (Ibid)

Conclusion

It is the contention of this paper that, at present, what the Nigerian woman needs is sound political education capable of raising her level of awareness of her over-all fundamental human rights rather than agitation for lucrative political offices. The type of political education envisaged here is one that is capable of engendering the spirit of competition with anyone from any part of the globe – and in all fields of human endeavour. This type of education would make the educated not to be satisfied with being invited and used as mere clappers and dancers at political rallies and campaign venues, only to be dumped thereafter. Anyone who embraces this type of education being proposed here is expected to gain the requisite practical knowledge, one which is likely to improve the self-image of the student. Therefore, a lot is likely to be achieved if contemporary Nigerian women leaders are prepared to design programmes that would promote female education and political emancipation. The success or failure of such educational programmes is not to be measured by the number of women holding political posts, but it should be assessed by the level of awareness and preparedness of the Nigerian woman to assert, defend and protect her fundamental rights.

After all, a person may be politically alert, rich in political ideas and ideals, and yet such a person may not be interested in holding political post. He or she may choose to be a political analyst or commentator. The effort of some women organisations should be commended in this regard. One of such organisations is Women in business and public service which is currently engaged in the sensitisation of women to take up the challenge of improving themselves rather than depending on men in their private and public life. It is believed that Nigerian women would be doing themselves a lot of good by participating actively in national development and common good, and one of the ways they can do this is to ensure the proper and effective education of the girl child.

It is important and relevant to observe here that the on-going collection of nomination forms for the expression of interest to contest various elective posts under the various political parties has witnessed a high display of apathy on the part of the Nigerian womenfolk. It is indeed very sad that not more than one percent of those jostling for one elective office or the other are women. One way by which women in Nigeria may prove that they are interested in partisan politics will be to collect, fill and return the nomination forms. However, what is currently being witnessed is that only very negligible number of them show interest in contesting, and yet, these are the same people who will later demand for thirty-five percent representation in governance! They believe in being invited to take up certain posts made available to them by men, an act referred to in this paper as patronage. We have consistently maintained that political offices should be occupied only by those who are eminently qualified, competent, and are interested in playing politics, not those who are there just to fill women's quota. The challenges of public office do not respect gender balancing. Leaders and members of women professional bodies such as Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), Council of Registered Engineers (COREN), National Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), and the rest, have since realised that the best and fastest way for women to compete favourably with men in the society is to acquire sound education, requisite skills, cognate experience, professional training and re-training in their chosen fields of specialisation. On the basis of this awareness, they try to discourage members of their ranks from depending on mere invitation by male politicians since this act would amount to playing second fiddle to men.

The rate at which pressure groups are making demands for the reservation of particular percentages for their members in Nigerian polity is enough to show the futility of depending on patronage and tokenism in political calculation and permutation. The reason for this is not far-fetched. Politics is that profession in which the would-be politician does not require formal training and skills, and yet he or she is a professional! That is not all. In Nigeria, politics has become a gold mine in which case politicians of all hues readily become millionaires over-night. Any wonder then that every pressure group now agitates for this or that quota in public offices. Politics is no longer seen as a means of rendering service to humanity, but a means of making millions of Naira within the shortest possible time. We cannot ignore the Nigerian way of doing things. Before we realise it, every thinkable group in the country is now advocating a particular percentage of public offices to be reserved for their respective members. For instance, people living with disability want thirty (30) percent of public offices; the Albino Society advocates ten percent, the list is legion.

Finally, as change agents, Nigerian women must be clear of what they want to achieve in joining partisan politics, how they intend to achieve their political goals, as well as who they are 'fighting' for. They must realise that the first hurdle to be cleared is the development of the self-image of the woman. Politics is politics. There is no such thing as male politics or female politics. To 'fight' for one's rights (through healthy competition and human capital development) is different from asking to be seen as a group of endangered species which either requires special and preferential treatment, or a group of supporters of male politicians waiting to be compensated.

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