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Impact of women and youth inclusion in Nigerian governance

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Abstract

Political participation serves as the cornerstone of democracy. While it is generally perceived as liberal and unrestrictive, studies indicate that women and youth, who represent over half of Nigeria's national population, continue to experience marginalization and discrimination. Consequently, the aim of this study is to investigate the impact of inclusion of women and youth in Nigeria's governance framework. The findings reveal that the involvement of women and youth in governance promotes equality and influences both the spectrum of policy matters considered and the nature of proposed solutions. Their political engagement yields significant benefits for democracy, such as enhanced responsiveness to the needs of citizens, increased collaboration across party and ethnic boundaries, and a more sustainable future. Furthermore, given that a significant proportion of those instigating societal crises are young men and women, meaningful engagement of this demographic in state administration could lead to a substantial reduction in conflict. This research is based on secondary data, utilizing online resources to gather relevant scholarly literature, journals, and other materials, all of which are properly cited. To address the challenges related to the inclusion of women and youth in Nigeria's governance, the study recommends that the government implement a quota system at all levels and engage key stakeholders, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission and political parties, to ensure strict compliance with this initiative.

Keywords: Democracy, Inclusive Governance, Women and Youth

Introduction

One of the paramount issues that have pervaded global discourse is the involvement of women in political arenas and decision-making processes. The sufficient representation of women in positions of public policy formulation is deemed essential for the attainment of societal advancement. Abubakar and Ahmad (2014) posited that women comprise nearly fifty percent of the global population; however, their engagement in decision-making and broader political mechanisms remains considerably lower in comparison to their male counterparts. According to the 2019 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2019) Report, women hold a mere 24.3% of the seats in National Parliaments. The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria, specifically Article 15(2) and Article 42(1)(a) and (b), (2) and (3), explicitly prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex.

It has been noted that Nigerian women have historically functioned within a less liberal democratic framework, notwithstanding the constitutional guarantees that afford them equal rights in political engagement within the nation (Akaje & Adelowo, 2018). The disconcertingly low rates of women's participation in the political sphere have incited advocacy from women's interest groups, governmental entities, and non-governmental organizations at both national and international frameworks. The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria includes provisions for affirmative action aimed at ensuring that the composition of government aligns with the principle of Federal character. Nevertheless, the current National Gender Policy (NGP) has recommended a 35% affirmative action, advocating for a more inclusive representation of women, with a minimum of 35% in both elective political and appointive public service roles.

Nearly fifty percent of the global populace is comprised of individuals under the age of 30, signifying the youngest demographic cohort in history (Erinle & Abidemi, 2024). While approximately half of the world's population is under 30 years old, their influence over the decisions that will shape their future remains markedly limited. It is noteworthy that an astonishing 90% of these young individuals, amounting to billions, reside in developing nations. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) underscored in 2013 the critical necessity of engaging young people in addressing pressing global challenges. According to the World Population dashboard provided by the United Nations, as of January 19, 2024, approximately 43.8% of the global population is under the age of 30. Nigeria is witnessing an increase in its youth population, leading to a demographic phenomenon known as the "youth bulge," which can be attributed to the country's continuously growing population. Zohdy (2017) accentuates the significance of incorporating young individuals into governance structures to avert adverse outcomes such as diminished GDP, reduced voter engagement, heightened violent extremism, increased criminal activities, and social instability.

Consequently, the substantive involvement of women and youth in governance at the national, local, and community levels has emerged as a significant focal point in global development policy. The engagement of women and youth in political arenas contributes to the promotion of equality and influences the spectrum of policy matters that are addressed, as well as the nature of the solutions that are proposed. At present, the level of women's participation and representation remains significantly lower in comparison to their male counterparts, thereby posing a challenge to the inclusiveness imperative requisite for the realization of development within electoral democracy.

Methodology

The research critically examines, analyzes, and interprets pertinent facts through the lens of secondary data. Data sources include relevant scholarly publications, journalistic accounts, reports from international bodies, and existing research articles. The analysis of this compiled information aims to ascertain the impact and influence of women and youth engagement in shaping Nigeria's democratic landscape during the specified period.

Theoretical Framework

Classical Liberal Theory

Key figures associated with classical liberal theory include John Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Bentham, and J.S. Mill. Locke posited an individual's right to resist and even revolt against the state should it fail to adequately protect fundamental rights to life, liberty, and property. He underscored the concept of limited government predicated on individual consent. Montesquieu's theory of the separation of powers aimed to prevent dictatorial governance. Utilitarian thinkers broadly emphasized the importance of citizen involvement in the political sphere, arguing that governments should prioritize the "greatest good for the greatest number" by fostering increased political participation. Jeremy Bentham, known for his "pleasure and pain" theory, advocated for universal adult suffrage. J.S. Mill, building upon the work of his father, James Mill, stressed the need to improve the quality of democracy through enhanced political participation, focusing on the moral dimensions and potential for individual development through such engagement.

This theoretical framework aligns with the present study by highlighting the importance of citizen participation for effective governance. Ensuring citizen involvement can facilitate the government's ability to achieve optimal outcomes and mitigate societal unrest. In the context of Nigeria, incorporating marginalized groups such as women and youth in political processes is crucial. Neglecting these demographics can lead to social instability and engagement in criminal activities. Nations that prioritize the inclusion of women and youth in governance often demonstrate distinct and more effective patterns of governance.

Women's Participation in Governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999-2023)

The nation has yet to achieve the 30% and 35% affirmative action targets for women, as stipulated by the 1995 Beijing Women Conference and the National Gender Policy (Jamiu et al., 2024). Specifically, in legislative elections from the return of democracy in 1999 through the 2023 general election, women continue to be substantially underrepresented in the National Assembly, a fact underscored by statistical analysis.

Percentage of Women in National Assembly from 1999-2023

Electoral Year	Senate	Percentage	House of Representatives	Percentage
1999	3	2.8%	12	3.4%
2003	4	3.7%	21	5.8%
2007	9	8.3%	27	7.3%
2011	7	6.4	25	6.8%
2015	7	6.4	22	6.11%
2019	7	6.4	10	2.78%
2023	3	2.8%	16	4.44%

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in National Parliaments" (cited in Nkwachukwu, 2018).

Percentage of Gubernatorial Seats Won by Each Sex Across the Six (6) Geopolitical Zones in the Country From 1999-2023

Year	Men	Women
1999-2003	36	-
2003-2007	36	1 (Anambra State)
2007-2011	36	-
2011-2015	36	-
2015-2019	36	-
2019-2023	36	-

Source: Salau (cited in Janiu et al., 2024)

Geographical Distribution of Young Legislators (25 – 45yrs) In 2023

Based on a 2023 report by Yiaga Africa, Nigeria, adhering to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU) standards, defines young parliamentarians as those aged 45 or younger. The National Assembly has subsequently formed a Young Parliamentarians Forum for members meeting this age criterion. Analysis of the House of Representatives elections reveals that among the 3,112 candidates, 1,079 were within the 36-45 age bracket. Of these, 88 candidates were successful, constituting approximately 24% of the House's total membership. A regional disparity exists, with the Northwest geopolitical zone accounting for the largest proportion (35 out of 102) of legislators under 45, while the Northeast and Southwest regions exhibit comparatively lower representation.

Geographical Region	Number of Legislators
North East	10
North West	35
North Central	17
South East	11
South-South	18
South West	10

Source: Yiaga Africa (2023)

Historical Overview of Women Participation In Governance Structure Of Nigeria

Prior to the colonial era in Nigeria, women held substantial and multifaceted positions in the political sphere, contributing to community governance and decision-making processes. These roles, while diverse across ethnic groups and regions, often involved significant economic influence stemming from their involvement in agriculture, trade, and resource management. This economic agency, exemplified by the Igbo women's participation in trade networks, conferred power within their communities. Furthermore, women held positions of spiritual authority as priestesses and custodians of religious traditions in societies like the Yoruba and Igbo, enabling them to influence social and political affairs (Njoku, 1985). In select regions, women participated in local councils, contributing their perspectives to community matters and playing crucial roles in conflict resolution and mediation (Suleiman, 2014). Certain

societies even featured female rulers, such as the Iyalode among the Yoruba and the Nneoha among the Igbo, who actively contributed to political leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

However, the advent of colonialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries dramatically altered the status of women in Nigeria. Colonial legal systems, frequently patriarchal, eroded traditional rights and limited women's access to property and decision-making forums. Colonial policies also disrupted traditional economic structures, disadvantaging women through the promotion of cash crops and wage labour that favored men (Smith, 2006). While Western education, initially limited for women, eventually provided some with the means to challenge gender norms, Christian missionary influences also reinforced patriarchal structures through their educational and healthcare initiatives. Despite these challenges, the early 20th century saw the rise of women's political activism, exemplified by organizations like the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), which protested discriminatory policies. Leading figures such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti campaigned for suffrage and social justice, raising awareness of women's issues (Onyishi, 2020). Women's involvement in the independence movement further shaped the political landscape, laying the groundwork for subsequent discussions on women's rights in post-colonial Nigeria (Njoku, 1985).

Nature of Youth Exclusion from Governance in Nigeria

The marginalization of young people from meaningful involvement in Nigerian politics is a multifaceted phenomenon, stemming from legal stipulations, psychological influences, societal structures, and other contributing factors. A primary barrier to youth participation lies within the constitutional framework. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as Abdurashied (2021) notes, establishes minimum age requirements for holding political office, effectively precluding many young citizens. Specifically, the presidency is restricted to individuals aged 40 and above. While individuals aged 30 and above are eligible to contest for seats in the House of Representatives and State Assemblies (Sections 65, 106, 131, and 177), the National Youth Policy's definition of youth as those between 18 and 35 highlights a significant discrepancy. Consequently, by the time an individual is eligible to run for governor, they are no longer classified as youth.

Moreover, even for positions in the House of Representatives or State Assembly, financial constraints represent a substantial impediment. As Abdulyakeen (2021) argues, the elevated cost of nomination fees imposed by political parties further exacerbates the situation, rendering the process susceptible to the influence of wealthy patrons and political power brokers, thus hindering the ability of young people to attain elective office. Nigerian youth have been conditioned, both psychologically and sociologically, to accept a political hierarchy that inherently excludes them from leadership roles. The pervasive notion of youth as "leaders of tomorrow" has fostered a sense of disengagement from active political participation at the highest levels. This cynicism, as observed by Kukah (1999), extends to a detachment from the nation-state itself. Elders frequently discredit and label the youth as incapable, perpetuating a cycle of power retention within established political elites (Ibezim, 2019).

Despite comprising a significant portion of the electorate, with over 50% of registered voters (YIAGA Africa, 2018) and acting as a catalyst for political change, their direct involvement in political decision-making remains limited. They represent a voting bloc systematically prevented from seeking office, facing various legal and political barriers. Furthermore, their interests are often marginalized in policy considerations following elections, diminishing their benefits from political representation.

Over the past two decades, Nigerian democracy has been marred by a prevalence of unaccountable leadership, largely fueled by widespread electoral malpractice that renders the electorate's vote inconsequential. Systemic corruption, endemic within both elected and appointed officials, has engendered significant disillusionment and a sense of irrelevance amongst the Nigerian populace (Abdulrasheed, 2021). This disconnect has resulted in a marked chasm between leaders and the citizenry, as the former routinely disregards the demands of the latter. Consequently, many young Nigerians fail to perceive a tangible link between political participation and its impact on their lives, adopting a fatalistic approach. Driven by aspirations of wealth and political involvement, some youths become vulnerable to manipulation, serving as instruments of political violence at the behest of ambitious politicians. The utilization of such "thugs" by Nigerian politicians exacerbates political tensions and fuels frequent clashes between rival groups and parties (Kakwagh & Ikwuba, 2010).

Obstacles to Women and Youth Political Representation

1. Socio-cultural and economic factors

Analyses of women limited political participation in Nigeria frequently emphasize the significant influence of the nation's socio-cultural and economic structures in shaping the pool of candidates considered viable for elected office (Aina, 2003). Academic research suggests that women face considerable obstacles to political advancement due to systemic disadvantages rooted in gender ideologies, established cultural norms, and socially prescribed roles for both sexes. These challenges are compounded by factors such as lower literacy rates, inadequate access to childcare and healthcare services, and widespread economic hardship. Furthermore, economic constraints present a substantial barrier to youth participation in Nigerian politics. High rates of unemployment and pervasive poverty, with youth unemployment exceeding 30% according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2020), divert young people's focus away from political engagement as they prioritize securing basic necessities.

2. Political factors

In Nigeria, systemic impediments to female political representation stem from both the established political structures and prevailing practices. Scholarly analyses of this underrepresentation often highlight the influence of the national political system and its specific characteristics, such as the design of the electoral system and the existence (or absence) of mechanisms like gender quotas within party recruitment strategies. This perspective posits that the established "rules of the game" within the political arena constitute the principal determinant of disparities in female representation across comparable societies. Consequently, altering these established rules is considered the most efficacious method for fostering

increased female participation in political leadership roles (Karam, 1998). Similarly, youth involvement in Nigerian politics faces significant obstacles due to the prevailing political environment. Prominent challenges include pervasive political violence, widespread corruption, and restricted access to established political networks. Given that intimidation and violence frequently characterize Nigerian elections, many young individuals are deterred from actively engaging in the political process, fearing for their personal safety and well-being (Amanyie et al., 2015).

3. Educational Barriers

Access to quality education is crucial for informed political engagement. However, numerous women and young Nigerians fail to receive adequate education. The educational system in Nigeria faces challenges including insufficient funding, inadequate facilities, and a lack of qualified teachers (Obaze, 2023). Consequently, many women and youth experience limited access to educational resources and low literacy levels. Political literacy is essential for understanding and participating in political processes. Unfortunately, many young Nigerians do not have the educational background required for effective political participation.

Impact of Women Participation in Governance

Enhanced political participation of women is a crucial factor in achieving gender equality and empowering women. The empowerment of women in politics can stimulate economic growth, as they are inclined to advocate for the provision of vital social services. When women occupy leadership roles within their communities, they are more likely to engage in local activities and express their concerns. Women in governance often push for increased allocation of resources towards education, health, and human rights issues. According to Dufflo (2012), women are likely to prioritize women's issues and promote various policy initiatives that enhance the well-being of all members of society. Governance by women typically results in a focus on family welfare, as they strive to support families and children. These observations underscore the necessity of women's political empowerment for overall development. Grown et al (2005) suggest that greater participation of women in governance can lead to improvements in the quality of governmental institutions and foster increased trust among citizens. Similarly, Dollar et al (2001) previously noted that women's involvement in politics and governance can contribute to a reduction in corruption levels.

Nonetheless, numerous young women have emerged as prominent political figures and advocates for gender equality, overcoming various obstacles. Aisha Yesufu, a prominent activist and co-founder of the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) initiative, serves as a significant example. The Chibok schoolgirls were abducted by Boko Haram, prompting the BBOG campaign, which commenced in 2014, to advocate for their rescue (Zagi, 2024). Through Yesufu's leadership in this movement, the global community became aware of the plight of the abducted girls and recognized the urgent need for enhanced protection and education for Nigerian girls. Furthermore, Yesufu has ardently advocated for increased political engagement among women. She has publicly condemned discrimination and violence against women due to their gender and has inspired young women to actively participate in the political arena. Her

initiatives have motivated many young women to engage in political processes and champion their rights.

Impact of Youth Participation in Governance

It is essential to focus on the inclusion and engagement of young people in the political arena and governance. This is important because when young individuals take on leadership roles, they ensure that the unique needs of youth, women, men, and children are incorporated into development strategies and policy measures (Gbenro, 2022). Furthermore, young people can advocate for political or policy reforms when they have a leadership platform to do so. The involvement of youths, who often find themselves as both perpetrators and victims of violent extremism, will enhance the government's preventive and responsive strategies, which are vital for establishing a stable and resilient society. As Zohdy (2017) emphasizes, youth engagement should entail collaborating with them in governance, as well as with their surrounding communities to mend the trust deficit. Empowering the youth with a voice in governance and decision-making processes will enable them to realize their individual potential, steer clear of negative behaviors, contribute positively to societal well-being, and foster institutional capacity.

Zohdy (2017) further posits that the engagement of youth is most impactful when regarded as a means to achieve specific objectives. Indeed, young individuals have demonstrated their capability to contribute positively towards a better world, as evidenced by their dedication to realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and addressing significant challenges faced by their generation, including inequality and climate change. Initiatives led by youth are often characterized by high energy and creativity, frequently resulting in favorable outcomes. It is essential that youth political participation focuses on comprehensive inclusion, encompassing political, economic, and social dimensions. In fostering social inclusion, young people play a vital role as proactive researchers, capable of identifying the needs of their communities while simultaneously enhancing their skills with the support of adult mentors and leaders to effectively address these needs.

Conclusion

The involvement of women in Nigerian politics is a matter of significant concern. For many years, women have been relegated to the background in the political arena; this has fostered an awareness of their under-representation in public affairs. Historical evidence, as highlighted in the study, indicates that women's political contributions have played a crucial role in shaping Nigerian politics, not only in the context of democratic governance but also during the pre-colonial period. Therefore, it is inconceivable to disregard the essential contributions of women in the formation of the Nigerian state while concentrating political authority among men. Furthermore, the inclusion of youth in governance is vital for the advancement of democracy in the country. Young individuals are instrumental in driving societal change.

Recommendations

1. Implementing a quota system across all tiers of government while identifying and involving pertinent stakeholders, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission and political parties, to guarantee strict compliance with this system.
2. The government ought to collaborate with political parties and institutions to foster policies that encourage youth participation. This encompasses endorsing internal party reforms, such as the establishment of youth quotas in candidate selection and prioritizing youth policies.
3. The Interparty Advisory Council (IPAC), which serves as the collective organization for political parties in Nigeria, should engage closely with the leadership of various political parties to explore methods for enhancing women's participation at the party level, including the reduction of nomination or interest forms.
4. Civil society organizations and the government should provide training initiatives for young individuals, women, and men regarding political systems, the rights of women and youth to participate, and their roles in decision-making processes.

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