



International Journal of Development and Sustainability

ISSN: 2186-8662 – www.isdsnet.com/ijds

Volume 3 Number 9 (2014): Pages 1836-1847

ISDS Article ID: IJDS13070701



Militarization of the Nigerian electoral process and the political disempowerment of the Nigerian woman

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Abstract

It is an established truism that it is the active and meaningful participation of large section of the populace that determine the health and vibrancy of any democratic polity. And that the beginning and end of democracy is hinged on the effective empowerment of the citizenry in governance especially in the area of public policy direction and electoral process. It is in light of this fact that the paper examines the role electoral violence plays as a constraining and militating factor against Nigerian women active involvement in the electoral politics of the country. The central argument of the paper is that election related violence is mainly a masculine phenomenon and such as it is a real and formidable disincentive to active women participation in the democratic electoral process. Our conclusion is that to improve the role of the Nigerian women in the decision making process, there is the urgent need to make the Nigerian electoral process female gender sensitive by taking adequate measures to confront the menace of electoral violence.

Keywords: Electoral Process; Electoral violence; Female Gender; Political disempowerment; Governance; Electoral politics and Popular Participation

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Cite this article as: Inokoba, P.K. and Zibima, T. (2014), "Militarization of the Nigerian electoral process and the political disempowerment of the Nigerian woman", *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, Vol. 3 No. 9, pp. 1836-1847.

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1. Introduction

It is an established truism that the sustainability and vibrancy of any democratic polity is hinged on the effective and meaningful participation of the citizens of the state in the initiation and implementation of public policies as well as in the choice of their leaders. And for the citizen's participation in politics to be meaningful and effective, there must be a reasonable possibility that the participants' actions, whether individually or collectively, will have the intended effect on policy or the policy makers (Magstadt and Schotten, 1988; Alapiki, 2004; Paki and Inokoba, 2006). It is for this reason that political participation is referred to as empowering mechanism of the citizenry of the state.

The benefits of popular participation in governance are enormous. It is a source of vitality and creative energy; a viable defense against tyranny; means of enthroning collective wisdom in governance; makes government more responsible and accountable to the citizenry as well as serving as a means for realizing the democratic objective of equality and freedom by the citizens in the determination of their own affairs. It is for these reasons that responsive democratic political systems will put every institutional measure to confront and address challenges to popular participation in the governance process.

In a transitional democratic polity such as Nigeria, one real and formidable challenge to popular participation in the political process is the combative and militaristic nature of the electoral process. This ugly phenomenon popularly known as electoral violence is a major hindrance to active participation of the citizenry in the electoral process. And its greatest victim is the Nigerian woman. We consider this as a major threat to democratic sustainability and by extension the political development of the Nigerian state for the following reasons. For one, the Nigerian woman constitutes half of the country's population. A violent political environment will certainly deprive the Nigerian state of truly representative democracy and the contributions of a vital segment of the Nigerian population. Secondly, in Nigeria like in most "other societies, women assume five key roles: mother, producer, home-manager, community organizer and socio-cultural and political activists" (Agbalajobi, 2010). And for women to play these vital societal roles effectively, it is imperative that the political environment is inclusive enough as well as gender sensitive and friendly enough to enable them participate actively and meaningfully in the decision making process.

There is no denying the fact that women are grossly underrepresented in elective offices as a result of the miserable number of them that venture into the murky and turbulent waters of elective politics. Though the Fourth Republic has witnessed a relative increase in women's participation, but it has only been evidenced in ephemeral and less significant activities such as involvement in political campaigns and rallies, voting exercises, increase in the number of women occupying appointive positions, increase in the number of women related policies implemented by government, etc. However, evidence before us point to the fact that few and insignificant number of women contested and were elected into various elective posts in 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 general elections respectively. Though women constitute half of the Nigerian population, during the just concluded 2011 elections they only represented a paltry 9.2 percent of all candidates contested that the National Assembly elections, 8.7 percent of the State Houses of Assembly, 3.7 percent of candidates for governor and 16.5 percent for deputy governor positions. There was only one female

presidential candidate out of the twenty (European Union 2011 Election Report). This development is worrisome because it seriously questions the representative claims of the Nigerian democracy.

Though scholars have identified a combination of several factors that accounts for the low involvement of women in electoral politics, our focus in this discourse is on election related violence: our central argument is that electoral violence is a real and formidable disincentive to women active participation in electoral politics of the country. Our argument is built on the assumption that violence is primarily a male dominated activity which most women shy away from. And in most instances women are more of victims rather than perpetrators of such violent behaviour.

To achieve the objective of the discourse the paper is divided into five sections. It begins with an introduction followed by conceptual literature on electoral violence and women participation in politics. The third section takes a review of women participation in elective politics in Nigeria while the fourth part examines how electoral violence acts as a disincentive to women involvement in electoral politics in Nigeria. The paper concludes with recommendations charting the way forward.

2. Conceptual literature

Basically, electoral violence is violence associated with or arising from the electoral process and elections, which determines or influences its outcome. What features, then, makes an electoral process so tagged. This we will ascertain by conceptualizing violence. The word violence covers a broad spectrum of forceful imposition. On a continuum, it can vary from physical and forceful interaction between two being at one end to war and genocide at the other end.

Violence is the illegitimate and unauthorized use of force to effect decisions against the will or desires of others (Wolfe, 1969:606). It expresses rough or injurious physical force, action or treatment; an unjust or unwarranted exertion of force or power against the rights of others. In a sentence, it entails an extreme form of aggression.

The very essence of violence is disruptive and when such disruptive phenomenon is married to the understanding of elections and electoral processes, we can begin to put electoral violence in perspective as aggressively and unjustly, through force, influencing the outcome of elections. As Fischer (2002) puts it, electoral violence is “any random or organized act that seeks to determine, delay, or otherwise influence an electoral process through threat, verbal intimidation, hate, disinformation, physical assault, blackmail, destruction of property, or assassination”. In the same line of thought Igbuzor (2010) conceptualizes electoral violence as:

any act of violence in the course of political activities including pre, during and post election periods, and may include any of the following acts: use of force, thuggery, disruption of political meetings or violence at polling stations, or the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral process or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with electoral processes.

Arising from research by the Informational Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and its Framework for Electoral Violence Education and Resolution (EVER), election-related violence refers to “any violence or threat of violence that is aimed at any person or property involved in the election process, or at disrupting any part of the electoral or political process during the election process” (IFES 2011). Conceptualizing electoral violence this way exposes very important points. First, we are presented with a spectrum of the stages and make-up of electoral violence. More importantly, it brings to bear the fact that electoral violence transcends Election Day violence, which happens to be the popular perception.

Secondly, there are specific victims and specific perpetrators. Specific victims also transcend victims of Election Day violence. Other than immediate victims of Election Day violence (which tends to underscore electoral violence as Election Day violence) there are more general and extensive repercussions associated with pre and post election mentality of the electorate. These are more psychological than physical and antithetic to the country’s attempts at democratic consolidation. And so is its compound term, political violence. Electoral violence is a microcosm, as is inter and intra-party conflicts, inter-group conflicts over political gains, which are all aspects of political violence. In other words, political violence is a more embracing word that comprises of several forms of violence including electoral violence. Invariably, this means that while all electoral violence is political manifestation of violence on the other hand not all political violence is electoral violence.

The motives for electoral violence and its disruption of formal electoral processes inhibits participation especially of vulnerable sections of the electorate; its very nature being combative and militaristic. The more vulnerable section of the electorate being women. This goes counter to the very essence of legitimacy and popular consent which must derive from a significant participation of all political actors: those who are legitimized and those from whom legitimacy derives.

The notion of participation describes the extent to which individual members of a society share, take part or get involved in public life. Women participation, especially, has been a hot-button issue revolving around translation of political gains into changes in women’s status at all levels; quantitative versus qualitative representation that clearly addresses the needs of women underscored by the credo that a warped participation results in warped representation; legislative and policy reforms that support and promote women’s participation and advancement; roles and position of women in multiparty politics and the contribution of women’s participation in the political process.

It is also pertinent to make clear that women participation does not necessarily translate to women representation. In clearer terms, there may be an increase in participation of women and low levels of representation of women compared to men. Conversely, there may be higher representation of women in elective offices with low levels of women participation in the electoral process.

In any case, resolving the above issues will not take place in a vacuum. Women participation and its myriad gains as outlined above if treated singularly will be tantamount to isolating symptoms for treatment and ignoring the parent ailment. Their resolution is intricately linked to the openness of participatory mechanisms especially elections and electoral process. Should it not worry us then that the nature of the

mechanisms and processes of participation can empower or de-empower certain sections of the electorate and impede on their right to participate fully in the public life of their society?

3. Nigerian women participation in electoral politics in perspective

For more than five decades, the terms of the competition for electoral offices in Nigeria have been established by men. As Chapman in (Agbalajobi, 2010:2) maintained:

men are the major determinants of political actions and inactions generally concerned with the perpetuation of power of the state... when women compete with men for access to political power, they do so on the terms already established by men for competing among themselves

Over the years, there have been marginal increase in women participation and representation in elective offices in Nigeria. The data show considerable under-representation of women compared to men.

Table 1. Women Representation in Contested Positions

% of Secured Representation	Election Year
3 %	1999
4.5	2003
7 %	2007
4.1 %	2011

SOURCE: IPU PARLINE database Nigeria

Table 2. Women Representation in 2003, 2007 and 2001 General Elections

No. of women elected: 2011	No. of women elected 2007	No. of women elected: 2003	Available seat	Position	S/.N
0	0	0	1	Presidency	1.
7 (6.42%)	9 (8.26%)	3 (2.27%)	109	Senate	2.
12 (3.33%)	25 (6.98%)	21 (5.83%)	360	House of Reps	3.
0	0	0	36	Governorship	4.
N.A	54 (5.45%)	38 (3.84%)	990	State House of Assembly	5.

Source: Agbalajobi (2010)

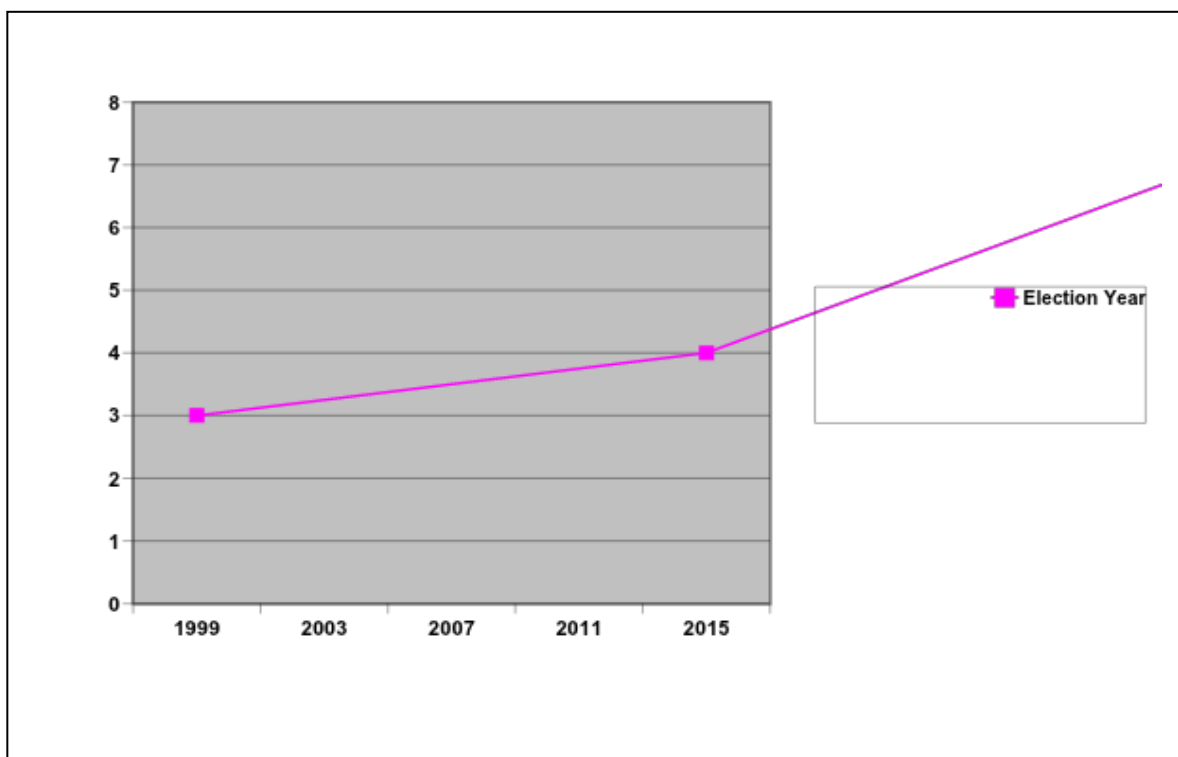


Figure 1. Graphic Presentation of Women Representation In 2003, 2007 and 2011 General Elections

As we can see from the above graph, secured representation of women in all elective positions in the 1999 general elections was 3%. This increased marginally to 4% in 2003 general elections. The 2007 general elections saw an appreciable increase to 7% and dipped to 4.1% in the 2011 general elections. This shows a 3% decline in women representation.

According to figures collated from INEC, a total of 7160 candidates contested for elective positions in the 2007 general elections. Of this member, only 628 (8.7%) were women. Of the 25 candidates that contested for the presidency, only 1 (1%) is a woman. In the National Assembly, out of 109 senators only 9 (8%) female senators were elected. Of the 360 members of the House of Representatives, only 25 (7%) were women. Thus in a 469 strong National Assembly, only 34 (7%) were women.

In the just concluded 2011 general elections 200 out of 2400 (8.33%) candidates for the House of Representatives and 80 out of 720 (11.11%) candidates for the senate were women. According to the Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC), only 909 out of 10037 (9.06%) candidates for all elective positions were women. These positions include the presidency, governorships and National Assembly Seats.

On a continuum, there is an overall depression in women participation and representation from 2007 to 2011. 7 out of the 109 (6.42%) senators elected in 2011 are women compared to 9 (8.2%) elected in 2007;

while only 12 out of 360 (3.33%?) members of House of Representatives are women down from 25 (7%) in 2007.

This is coming against the backdrop of Nigeria having ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (popularly known as the Maputo Protocol) and the convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In ratifying these protocols, Nigeria has among other things committed itself to promoting affirmative action and such other necessary measures to ensure that women equality in electoral processes and also ensuring that the electoral process is open, accommodative gender friendly to the women.

Sadly, there is also a National Gender Policy that commits to ensuring affirmative action for women, but as the data shows, women's participation and representation remains below the 35% benchmark. Existing realities of women participation and representation still fall way below the benchmarks set by regional and international conventions. Even more troubling is the fact several other African countries such as Rwanda, Uganda, Liberia, Congo, Botswana and South Africa are all having appreciable percentages of women occupying elective offices than what we have in Nigeria.

Without doubt, several reasons can be extended as to the low levels of women participation in elective politics and representation in Nigeria. Some consensus exists on how the Nigerian political environment constricts women participation and representation. From socio-cultural issues such as gender roles to economic factors coupled with the combative nature of elections and electoral processes. As Agbalajobi (2010:4) puts it "Nigerian politics is based on high political virility - (it is for) those who have all it takes to compete in the turbulent environment; those who possess the where with all to take it by force when force is required; those that can match violence with violence". Hence, the focus of this paper is based on the assumption that election related violence is a formidable barrier and disincentive to active and full participation of the Nigerian woman in the electoral politics of the country.

4. Electoral violence as a constraint on the Nigerian woman involvement in electoral politics

The road to the 2011 elections just like the previous elections in Nigeria was bed evilled with an unprecedented electoral violence. In a cover story of March 13 2011, entitled "bloody cost of violent power struggle" Sunday Trust gave a frightening statics of electoral violence. According to the newspaper "at least 90 killed and 209 injured, weeks to election". For the first time in the history of Nigeria, bomb blast became a reoccurring incidence in political rallies and gatherings. Even the president's campaign train was not spared of this ugly and frightening phenomenon. This situation of insecurity in the country even got worse after the announcement of the results of the presidential elections, as most parts of Northern Nigeria experienced an unprecedented scale of post election violence characterized by wanton destruction of lives and properties (Onwidiwe & Berwind - Dart, 2010). The conclusion which can be drawn from these developments is that there is a geometric increase in the level of electoral violence in Nigeria. And because of its adverse effect on the political participation of the citizens, electoral violence has become a major problem in the democratization process of Nigeria.

Our major concern in this section of the discourse is to establish how this ugly phenomenon acts as a disincentive to active and massive participation of the Nigerian woman in the electoral politics of the nation. It is a widely accepted fact that election – related violence has the widest ramification for political exclusion in the country. Voter’s intimidation, violent attacks at the voting centres and ballot snatching are Election Day hazards which discourage citizens from participation at the polls. In most cases these are final events in preventing electoral outcomes to be determined by actual voting (Agbalajobi, 2010). It is therefore not surprising that out of the 74million registered Nigerian voters only 39.5million of them actually voted during the crucial presidential elections (Gberie, 2011). And more relevant to the objective of the paper is the several unresolved cases of the political killings especially political aspirants and opponents even when actual voting is still far in the horizon. This highly volatile and militarized environment have subsequently scare off several high quality and good intentioned Nigerians especially the women folks from taking part in the electoral politics of the nation.

First of all, we need to establish the idea that violent behaviour and activities are mainly masculine phenomenon. Violence is not gender neutral. That is the main perpetrators of violent behaviour especially election related intimidation, thuggery and violence are of the men folks. This fact has been established by several researches (Inokoba and Maliki, 2011; Aniekwe and Kushic, 2011; Ikuomola and Okunola, 2011; Onwidiwe and Berwind – Dart, 2010; Lawal, 2010; Charles and Ikenna, 2009; Adeniyi, 2003). It is for this reason the discourse views political violence as a masculine activity. Male youth and men are at the centre of violent political behaviour. The killings and destructions reported from the different political dispensations results from men’s quest for power. The Nigerian male plan and finance political violence. While the women and children are the major victims of every violent ridden environment. Consequently, the attainment of political power in Nigeria is through violent struggle, which cannot be undertaken by people of light heart and good conscience. This view point is substantiated by the historical fact that there is hardly any election conducted in Nigeria that has been devoid of pre, during and post election violence. Most Nigerian male politicians prepare for elections as if they are military generals preparing for hot warfare. It is basically for this reason that political competition in Nigeria is regarded as a highly militaristic affair.

It is a generally accepted fact that women are imbued with light or faint hearts. They cannot struggle in an atmosphere of rancour and violence. The fear of being attacked is always in their hearts, their mind is not as strong as that of the men. As mothers, women always think about the safety and wellbeing of their societies; they cannot risk anybody’s life for electoral victory which most male politician in Nigerian politics care less about (Olugbemi, 2004). Invariably, any woman coming into this highly masculine and militaristic activity will be operating from a disadvantaged position and as the history of election has shown there are very few women who will dare to go into the musky waters of Nigerian elective politics. The fact of the matter is that women by their biological (or physiological), social and cultural make up are not constituted as medium of violence. It is for this reason women are naturally referred to as weaker sex. Women naturally are not as strong as men and as such so many of them cannot engage in political intimidation, thuggery, killing and other forms of violence in attempt to achieve their political objectives (Lawal, 2010). As a matter of emphasis, most women by nature fear and loathe thuggery and violence. Few women want to be seen or associated as

thug or perceived as a sponsor of violent behaviour. As mothers to their children and even the larger society, most African women will like to preserve their dignity anywhere they found themselves and since the Nigerian political terrain is highly combative and violence infested, it becomes difficult for women to compete favourably with men in such masculine environment.

That women by their socio-physiology and mindsets are weaker sex compared to their male counterparts is also substantiated by the fact that by global statistics there are very few women in military and violence associated careers, professions and even in violent anti-social activities like armed robbery. Though most countries include few women in their military, their role are largely confined to medical, administration and logistics fields. There is a general discrimination to placing women in combat roles even in countries that make it mandatory for women to serve in the military alongside with the men. Even women's right advocate groups are seriously against involving the women in active, combat operations of the military (Warresisters, 2000). As such only few countries such as China, Eritrea, Israel, Libya, Malaysia, North Korea, Peru and Taiwan draft women into the army. Globally the United States has the highest number of women in the armed forces; about 14.5% of member of the armed force are women (US Department of Defence 2010; CBC News Online, 2006). Hence, we can assert that bio-socio factors do not permit women to be involved in violent behaviour and conduct.

Scholars like Adeniyi (2003) and the 2010 Report of the Centre for Women Global Leadership are also of the opinion that most of the male orchestrated election related intimidation, harassment, killings and other forms of violence are deliberately tactic to frighten women from electoral competition thereby confining them to their docile and sedentary domains. This strategy has worked well over the years for the "do-or-die" Nigerian male politicians as evidenced in the reluctance of most qualified Nigerian women to participate in elections as a result of fear that they or their families could become targets of male orchestrated violence.

In the same vein, Lawal (2010) in his study of the behaviour of Yoruba female politicians in some Western Nigeria states observed that women generally become self-complacent under environment of intense political crisis and violence. When the political environment becomes saturated with violence, women tend to display complacency by preferring to move away from the source of violence instead of being engulfed with crisis and violence in the process of making a change. This attitude certainly cannot ensure adequate participation of women in electoral politics in Nigeria.

Another crude manifestation of violence that has militated against women's full and active participation in Nigeria electoral politics is the ugly phenomenon of violent godfatherism and forceful membership of dangerous cult or occult groups. One cannot talk about godfatherism in Nigerian politics without talking about the issue of these political godfathers forcing their godsons into membership of occult groups for protection as well as oath taking rituals to ensure that their political clients do their bidding once they get into office. And this is one aspect of Nigerian politics that is also dominated by the male folks. Women are scarcely political godmothers neither can they play the dangerous roles of political godsons. It is also an established fact that most of the election related violence in Nigeria politics are planned and financed by these selfish political godfathers (Ikuomola and Okumola, 2011; Arowolo and Aluko, 2010). Moreover this patron-client relationship is a very unstable, volatile and evidently, most of the time violent in nature. The

violent manifestation of this relationship also has a devastating effect on the entire society. The bloody political violence orchestrated by inglorious godfathers – Adedebu and Uba with their estranged godsons in Oyo and Anambra states respectively that led to wanton destruction of lives and properties cannot be easily forgotten in the annals of Nigeria political history. Again this is another very strong disincentive against women active participation in electoral competition. Because of the violent nature of godfatherism, there are very few Nigerian women that can effectively play this role. Neither can they play the violent role assigned to political godsons by their godfathers.

From the foregoing discussion, it is evidently clear that election related violence such as political intimidation, thuggery, lawlessness, godfatherism, rigging, harassment and killings are very strong factors mainstreaming women out of their full and active involvement in the electoral politics of the Nigerian state.

5. The way forward

From our presentation so far it obvious that one of the major challenges to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria is the issue of electoral violence. This is so because election related violence attacks the very soul and heart of modern day representative democracy which is the unrestricted, active and full participation of the citizenry in the decision making process of the political system. Though this ugly and frightening phenomenon is a bane to full and active participation of Nigerians in the electoral process, we were able to establish that women because of the socio-biological and traditional make-up are the worse victims of election related violence. It is a societal problem that the whole nation must rise up to confront. The fact of the matter is that electoral violence has lasted for so long because the Nigerian state has been handling the issue with kid gloves. Section 98 of the 2010 Electoral Act which stipulates the punishment for offences listed on Section 97 of the same Act is too lenient on offenders, and thus needs to be amended to reflect a weightier punishment. It is high time that election offenders are made to face the consequences of their offences in the most deterrent way. The civil society represented by several civil liberty organisations especially women's rights advocate groups must enlighten and mobilize Nigerians to pressurize the Nigerian political system to put in place stiff electoral laws that will make electoral fraud and violence, a heinous crime against the citizenry and state. If there is going to be any hope for a more female gender friendly political environment as a platform for sustainable democracy in Nigeria, politicians found guilty of electoral fraud and violence as well as all those that benefitted from it one way or the other should no longer be treated with kid gloves and palliatives. They must be made to face stringent and long lasting penalties and sanctions. It is hoped that this measure will serve as deterrence against any form of political lawlessness and violence as well as creating a more conducive and gender friendly environment for full and active involvement of women in the decision making process of the Nigerian state.

Again, it is also imperative that women advocate groups especially the First Lady's "Women Initiative for Change" move their focus from begging their male folks for palliative such as appointive positions to vigorously championing the need for amendment of relevant sections of our laws that will create a favourable environment for more women involvement in the elective and representative politics of the

Nigerian state. They should learn from the experience of their counterparts in Uganda and Rwanda, two African countries where women fought and achieved increased women's representation by making their governments adopt a proportional representative electoral system, which is more conducive to women's representation in political decision making. Invariably, women in Nigeria must fight for urgent and genuine constitutional reforms because women's political exclusion does not occur in isolation; it is connected to other forms of legal and social exclusions.

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