

## ETHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

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### **Abstract**

*Women, due to certain structural and functional constraints, are yet to achieve a favorable and expected position in societal politicking. Despite various women's liberation movements geared towards women's emancipation and increased involvement in politics, Nigerian women who account for 49.4% of the voting population, are yet to translate their numerical strength to electoral victory. This paper, therefore, advocates for increased women's participation by identifying ethical principles which underpin women's political participation. These principles are utilized to challenge existing religious and sexist classifications of women as politically inferior and mediocre. These classifications are identified as primary reasons for the poor participation of women in politics and governance. Based on the enumerated ethical principles, this paper recommends increased political participation while recognizing challenges to such increased participation. Utilizing the analytic and synthetic methods of research, it argues that these salient ethical principles demand healthy political environments, characterized by equal representation in governance and proper participation of women in politics, all of which engender social justice and the common good.*

**Keywords:** Challenges, Ethical principles, Nigeria, Political participation, Women.

### **Introduction**

Political philosophy, as a branch of philosophy, concerns itself with analyzing and justifying explanations of politics. Politics itself is the process through which humans order society according to their political values/ideals in accordance with their needs. As such politics is an indispensable aspect of human nature. Through politics, resources and opportunities are allocated to different sectors of society via an agreed/acceptable arrangement which results in a power structured relationship between people and groups in society. People who are tasked with the distribution of such opportunities and resources are legitimately empowered to do so through a political participatory process. In contemporary times, this process is supposedly open to men and women for effective and efficient political

participation. Political participation can therefore be defined as the activities through which members of society share in the selection of political leaders and public policy formulation, both of which determines the allocation of societal opportunities and resources (Ugwuegede, 2014).

As defined, political participation encompasses beyond voting and being voted for, to include all civic activities in the politicking process including political awareness, campaigning, as well as exercising political franchises either directly or indirectly through elected representatives. In Nigeria, the political process paints a picture of inclusivity for women – the ratio of women who are members of political parties outstrips male members, and more women are seen on campaign grounds than men. However, while women are adequately represented on campaign grounds and in party affiliations, the percentage of women elected political leaders is negligible compared with the percentage of men in such elected offices. As at May 2019, women occupied 11 out of 360 seats in the Nigerian House of Representatives, and 7 out of 109 seats in the Nigerian Senate, representing 3.84% of federal lawmakers; and 40 seats out of 944 legislative seats in State houses of Assembly. A total of 2,970 women were on electoral ballots nationwide, representing 11.36% of nominated candidates while 62 women representing 4.17% were elected. (Development, 2019) These figures represented a sharp decline from the 2015 elections whereas at January 2017, women occupied 22 out of the 360 seats in the Nigerian House of Representatives, 7 out of the 108 seats in the Nigerian senate, and 51 seats out of a total of 990 legislative seats in State Houses of Assembly, despite constituting 49.32% of the nation's population (Onyeji, 2018; Review, 2018). This fact, in a contemporary age that preaches inclusiveness, seems to imply that women are marginalized in Nigerian politics.

Politics aims at a well-ordered society, and political philosophers subject existing political ideas and theories to the anvil of rationalization and justification with a view to defining which, if any, of these theories and ideas approximate the political ideal. This task informs this discourse on women's political participation. This paper, therefore, attempts an ethical justification of the theoretical discourse on why women should participate in the political affairs of society. This task would be accomplished by an initial identification of the arguments proffered against women's political participation, an examination of the importance of ethics to politics, an enumeration of ethical principles which justify women's participation in politics, and finally, a cursory look at challenges militating against effective participation of women in politics.

### **Statement of Problem**

The advent of colonialism in Nigeria truncated the complementary role assigned to women in the pre-colonial era. Pre-colonialisation, the Nigerian patriarchy system espoused the complementary role played by women in social, economic and political domains by providing opportunities for women to occupy economic, social, political and religious positions and wield considerable power in such positions. With the advent of colonialism, Nigerian women lost their economic and political status to the colonial version of patriarchy which empowered men over women by providing opportunities for education and employment into white-collar jobs for men, thus ensuring that women lost their economic power to men, and eventually their political relevance. Post-colonial era women have barely fared better, with a proliferation of women-focused organisations agitating for women to be given equal opportunities to ensure adequate representation in governance.

Factors that limit women's political participation include gender stereotyping occasioned by patriarchy, poverty, illiteracy, religious interpretations and cultural norms. Women under patriarchy are stereotyped as weak, inferior to men, and partially rational beings in comparison with men who are viewed as strong, rational and superior to women. Characteristics and skills typically expected of leaders, including critical rationality and assertiveness are also attributed to men, resulting in the association of leadership positions with men. Furthermore, women lack the adequate financial resources necessary for politicking, exacerbated by limited access to financial support. The girl-child's education is also often sacrificed for the boy-child's due to the prevalence of poverty, resulting in more illiterate women than men. Religious and cultural norms also aid the stereotyping of women as the weaker sex who are forbidden from certain tasks and occupations, particularly leadership positions. All these factors act as justifications for the continued marginalization of women in the political sphere. The questions to ask at this juncture are therefore whether such continued marginalization is justified, and if not, whether the repeated calls for increased participation of women in politics is justified. Justifications of this sort typically fall under political philosophy, and since it also pertains to social conduct, ethics.

### **Ethics and Politics**

Two schools of thought characterize the debate on the relationship between ethics and politics. One, the school popularized by Niccolo Machiavelli, a renaissance philosopher who specifically stressed that political leaders should discount moralistic limitations in political struggles for power, resulting in 'the end justifies the means' dictum often brandished by people to justify their unethical conduct, and the other the school based on the ideas of ancient Greek and medieval scholars who opine that the common good surpasses selfish interest. Both schools present contrasting opinions on the relationship between ethics and politics, with the Machiavellian school arguing for a separation between ethics and politics, and the ancient Greek/medieval scholars school asserting that ethics and politics are inseparable. This debate can be resolved with a cursory look at what ethics, as a branch of philosophy, concerns itself with.

Ethics concerns itself with the rightness or wrongness of human conduct and its effect on society, and is therefore of immense importance to the field of politics, given that politics is primarily individual or collective acting in engagement with the structure and institutions of governance. It is also apt to note, that ethics possesses a prescriptive nature through which it proffers advice on how to make determinations of which actions are right and which wrong. Since it is the author's view that women have equal rights with men, it is necessary to examine some ethical principles in order to ascertain whether women's political participation is ethically justified or not.

### **Ethical Principles and Women's Political Participation**

Ethical principles refer to general judgments that serve as justifications for particular ethical prescriptions and evaluations of human actions. These principles provide generalized frameworks that can be applied in interpersonal relationships between members of society for resolving ethical dilemmas arising from daily activities. They are particularly useful in providing guidance on how ethical issues arising in particular professions are resolved (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001).

Ethical principles are of two types: Positive and Negative principles. Positive principles espouse conduct to be adopted. Among such conduct are honesty, respect for human dignity, cultivation of justice and consideration of the interest of others amongst other desirable conduct. Negative principles indicate conduct to be avoided as such conduct are both self-destructive and destructive to society. These include murder and stealing among others.

Both positive and negative ethical principles are held as universally applicable in that they are valid at all times and in all societies, although they are not absolute, as they admit of exceptions and are applied in varying degrees. It is apt to note here that the idea of universal ethical principles has been challenged with Ethical Relativism which holds that morality is relative and differs from one society to the other. However, this challenge is easy to overcome. Ethical principles can only be held as relative in the case that there is at least one society on the face of the earth where any ethical principle is overturned and its contrary held as the norm. Thus, if there exists a society where a negative ethical principle is viewed as right, and a positive one as wrong, then it would be possible to assert the validity of relative ethical principles. Ethical relativism also tends to conflate moral rules with fundamental ethical principles. The former simply prescribe how the latter should be applied in specific situations, and does not nullify the universality of the latter. Thus, ethical principles are presented in this paper as universal moral principles which any rational being can apprehend and adopt.

While not exhaustive, the ethical principles listed below comprise principles that hold in socio-political conduct and are therefore the focal point of this research. These include Beneficence, Non-maleficence, Justice, Reciprocity and Respect for persons.

### **Beneficence**

Simply defined, beneficence is a principle that holds that persons should act in ways to benefit others. It must be differentiated from benevolence, which is the moral virtue that predisposes one to acts of beneficence. Beneficence is a concept which connotes kind and merciful acts which aim at promoting the good of others (Beauchamp, 2013). As an ethical principle, it is a normative statement referring to actions that are intended to help others achieve their goals by either preventing possible harms or promoting their welfare. As such, it is regarded either as morally obligatory or as a moral ideal (Singer, 1972; Gert, 2005). In the social sphere, persons are treated ethically when their decisions are respected, and their well-being is sought by leaders of society. If being beneficent means acting in ways that will not only prevent harm from befalling others, but also in ways to promote others' welfare, it follows that discriminatory acts run counter to this ethical principle.

In Nigeria, there is a long history of men discriminating against women, especially in economic and political affairs. Nigeria is one of the few countries where 55% of

respondents answered 'No' to the question of whether women should have equal rights as men, indicating an inbred aversion to the idea of women as first-class citizens (Olurode, 2013, p. 3). This aversion is undoubtedly fed by religious interpretations and cultural norms which relegate women to the role of the subservient 'Other', an Other who lacks the ability to make sound decisions capable of leading to the public common good. Little wonder women are relegated to socio-cultural circles and denied the right to wield effective political and economic powers.

### **Non-maleficence**

Non- maleficence is the principle that holds that one should act in ways that would not cause harm to others. Where one's actions are likely to cause harm, or there is a slight risk of harm, one should refrain from acting. It is closely related to the principle of beneficence and is often conflated with it. However, it is quite distinct from beneficence in that while non-maleficence means 'do no harm', beneficence espouses acting in ways that not only does one refrain from causing harm, one also removes or alleviates existing harms.

The principle of non-maleficence is one of the easiest ethical principles to violate. While it states that one must avoid harm, it is difficult to ascertain all the consequences of one's actions as harm can be occasioned from actions that are intended for good. It is also difficult to define the nature of harm, given that an action that is universally acclaimed as good could also occasion harm (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). Harmful acts could also be beneficial, particularly in cases where the benefits accruing from such harmful acts far outweigh the imposed harm. Thus, harm is in the eye of the beholder.

Applying the principle of non-maleficence to societal issues, with particular emphasis on women's inclusion in political affairs tends to imply that intentional or unintentional acts aimed at excluding women's political participation or limiting such participation are acts that harm women by denying them equal participation in matters where determinations of how they should live are made.

### **Justice**

Justice is the constant will to give every person his/her due. Regarded as a cardinal virtue in human society, many philosophers have theorized about this principle, with many important works devoted primarily to its exposition. Such works

include Plato's *Republic*, John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Justice is a quality found in human relationships which evinces a sense of satisfaction arising from dealings in such relationships. It can also be defined as treating persons in the right manner. It is an ethical principle that holds that persons should not be treated arbitrarily, and should be treated equally under similar circumstances.

Etymologically derived from '*jus*' and '*jungeré*', meaning what is binding and to fit/join respectively, it is also loosely translated as the spider's web which holds society together. Various philosophers have also defined it in various ways, ranging from Solon and Hobbes' 'obedience to the law', Plato's 'proper action of all classes', John Stuart Mill's 'getting what is your right', to John Rawls' 'justice as fairness, the first virtue of a social institution whose idea is embedded in the rationality of every rational creature'.

Justice applies in various areas, resulting in a typology of justice which includes Social, Criminal and Commutative among others. Given the scope of this research, our major concern rests with Social justice, the type of justice which is involved where society strives to achieve the common good based on equality of all members, as well as the recognition of the rights and dignity of all. Social justice is thus a normative concept concerned with the notions of fairness and the principles of equality, equity, rights and participation, all of which underpin inclusivity (Khechen, 2013). Traditionally, theorists on social justice have propounded three criteria which guide this principle, including the principles of need, desert and equality. Contemporary conceptions have however argued that these criteria and the distributive paradigm on which they are based, are insufficient for a framework of social justice, given that societal inequalities are perpetuated by societal structures and institutions (Young, 1990).

John Rawls' seminal book *Theory of Justice* in which he espoused the idea of justice as fairness is of particular importance to this work as it promotes the idea of justice as a principle which can be arrived at practically with the recognition of humans' common rationality and equality. Rationality is what distinguishes humans from other animals, and is defined as "...the ability to employ abstract concepts to grasp the relations among them, and to communicate this understanding to others" (Halliday & Long, 1997 p. 40). Aristotle even holds it to be principal amongst all other human functions; being the primary determinant of choices made through a reflective decision-making process (Aristotle, 1907).

Khechen identifies four necessary values from John Rawls' principles of justice (p. 5). These values are Equality, Equity, Rights and Participation. Equality espouses

that all people, regardless of differences, are entitled to benefit from societal resources, including in the political sphere; Equity, that equal distribution does not always ensure fairness, thus, the need to give everyone what they need to succeed; Rights, legal and moral, must be protected by adequate rules and norms; and Participation, where persons are involved in decisions that govern their lives.

Extrapolating from the above, justice holds only in the presence of fair treatment of all persons and is based on the assumption that all humans are equal by virtue of their capacity for rational thinking. One wonders therefore why, if the above holds true, women are termed less rational than men, and are therefore excluded from political decision-making processes.

### **Reciprocity**

Reciprocity is a social norm that holds that people should respond to others on the basis of how others behave to them. Where they are treated kindly, they are expected to show kindness in return, and where they are received with hostility, they respond, either by ignoring the hostility or in kind. It is typically regarded as the basis for social life, as evident from daily interactions between persons, where each expects that the other would respond to an action in a particular way (Restakis, 2013). In this sense, it is regarded as a determinant of human behaviour, a behavioural response to an action viewed as kind or unkind (Falk & Fischbacher, 2000).

Three main types of reciprocity have been identified as generalized reciprocity, balanced /symmetrical reciprocity and negative reciprocity (Sahlins, 1972). Generalized reciprocity occurs when persons share goods and services without expecting anything in return. This type of reciprocal behaviour is found between parents and children, married couples, and clans and is a form of reciprocal behaviour that fosters social cohesion by building trust between the involved parties.

Balanced or Symmetrical reciprocity occurs when a person shares a good or service with the expectation of receiving an equal return from the beneficiary in future. This type of acting is found between neighbours, friends, relatives, and coworkers, and is an informal mode of social exchange. It is trust-based, with the expectation that any person who negates the expectation by refusing to repay gifts and favours will be made to face unpalatable social consequences.



Negative reciprocity is found in economic transactions. It occurs where persons trade their goods and services for goods and services of equal worth. It involves a low level of trust, as the 'seller' expects an immediate return on his/her 'investment'. For this singular reason, it is the form of reciprocal behaviour found between strangers involved in economic transactions.

From the above, reciprocity can therefore be identified as the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit. It is defined by the need to want to give something in return when something is received, as well as the expectation of getting something back in return when one gives. Humans typically feel compelled to give back when they receive something, whether in kind, cash, or in verbal appreciation. On the other side of the coin, humans also expect to derive something from their act of giving. Such derived benefits could be monetary, or of a social nature, through the building of stronger relationships.

Reciprocity is a universal structure of human morality that is applied variously in accordance with societal norms. It is that norm which lies at the heart of the theological injunction to do unto others as you would have them do to you, as well as at the heart of the Kantian injunction to act in ways such that we would wish our actions to be universalized. It is a norm governed by the principles of cooperation and equality, where each person engages in reciprocal actions with the strong belief in getting back an equal measure. This belief is anchored on the assumption that the recipient of the act is of equal worth, and values the act in the same vein it was done. This belief thus lays the foundation for cooperative endeavours, with each person's assurance of equal cooperative behaviour from other members in a collective action. It is particularly evident in the assignment of worth and dignity to every human being, as encapsulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Reciprocity can therefore be regarded as a stance of expecting similar behaviour from other agents who are of equal measure. For every act 'A' performed towards another person, the moral agent expects that reactions would occur, particularly where act 'A' is a behavioural act. Reactions to act 'A' could be of equal worth and type to act 'A' and could be otherwise. It is a demand for the moral agent to behave kindly to those who behave kindly to her and to respond to benefits contingent on the value of the benefit received. In this way, social and stable relationships are built, and blame and punishment meted out for harmful conduct.

Over the ages, women have been treated as inferior to men, despite being accorded equal status as humans. Applying reciprocity to this situation would imply that women should equally begin to treat men as inferior beings, in direct reciprocity

to the stance adopted by men towards them (women), or ignore men's opinions. Neither of these options seems particularly viable, as this age-long degradation of womenfolk has resulted in a deeply ingrained belief in the superiority of men buoyed by men's appropriation of economic and political powers. The best that women can hope for at this time is therefore to be afforded opportunities via extra provisions under the law to enable more of them to participate in politics.

### **Respect for Persons/ Autonomy**

Respect for persons is an ethical principle that acknowledges that by virtue of a person's autonomy, the person has the right to hold beliefs and make choices of actions to take based on these beliefs. Autonomy, a synonym of free will, is defined etymologically as self-rule. *Ab initio*, it was used to refer to the Greek city states' ability to regulate their affairs independent of external control (Anon). In contemporary times it is defined as a character ideal that grants persons the means to working out their projects in the world (Young R., 1982); a necessary tool in the achievement and promotion of happiness, as it is only the autonomous person who has the capacity for self-governance. Without autonomy, an individual is subject to the whims and caprices of his urges, and thereby lacks self-direction (Mill, 1859), the type of control one has over one's actions/behavior (Clarke, 1992); and the capacity to determine the choice of action to be taken, based on reflection upon the reasons for taking such actions.

Respect for persons dictates that when persons make choices, such choices should be respected. Even where such persons suffer from diminished autonomy, in cases of incarcerated, aged, and mentally ill persons, they are entitled to protection from forceful compliance. This respect is often missing in men's relationship with women. The principle of paternalism - that the father knows best, or in this case, the husband, is often employed to persuade women to make particular choices. In a 2011 field study conducted by Fatile, O. J. et al, all 635 female respondents voted for male candidates, with 37.2% stating they were not aware of any female candidate, closely followed by 29.8% who based their electoral behaviour on directives from their husband (p. 1086). This implies that if all respondents had been aware of the presence of female candidates, the highest frequency would have been respondents who were directed on how to vote by their husbands. Ultimately, this paints a vivid picture of how women's choices are typically subtly or forcefully influenced by their male folk who look down on women's ability to make rational choices as they are seen as emotional beings.

### **Justifying Women's Political Participation Ethically**

Having examined the above ethical principles, it is crystal clear that none of these principles prescribes any untoward or discriminatory behaviour towards women. Beneficence advocates that actions to be taken must benefit others, and where previous actions have occasioned harm, actions must be taken to remove or alleviate such harms. Non-maleficence dictates 'do no harm'; Justice, that people should be treated fairly in distributions of benefits and burdens; Reciprocity, that people should expect others to treat them in ways similar to the treatment they have meted out; and Respect for persons (Autonomy), that people have the right to make choices free from external coercion and such choices should be respected.

Discriminatory acts of the type practised against women in the political arena are undeniably unbeneficial, harmful, unfair, and hardly reciprocal of women's behaviour towards men. If this is so, and ethical principles provide justifications for evaluating conduct, the inevitable conclusion is that there is no ethical justification for sidelining women in the political arena.

### **Provisions for Ensuring Women's Full Participation in Politics**

Given the above justifications of women's participation in politics, it is necessary to identify specific provisions that have been made to ensure an increase in women's political participation, both at international and national levels.

1. Article 21 of the UDHR decrees that everyone has the right to participate in governance either directly or through representatives (United Nations, 1948);
2. Articles 7 and 8 of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) encourages member states to take appropriate measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women (United Nations, 1979);
3. The Beijing Platform of Action advocates for the removal of all obstacles to women's participation in both public and private spheres and recommends governments to adopt the principles of shared power and responsibility (United Nations, 1995);

4. Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals calls for bridging the gender gap and encouraging the visibility of women in politics (United Nations, 2000);
5. The Maputo protocol calls for action on the part of member states to act in ways that promote equal participation of women in politics (African Union, 2005);
6. Sections 40 and 42 of the Nigerian constitution provides for the right of all Nigerians to participate in public life and forbids any form of discrimination respectively (Nigeria, 1999); and
7. The Nigeria National Policy on Women prescribes 35% of political appointments to be to women (Nigeria, 1999).

If these provisions have been made in the effort to secure a better acceptance for women in the political arena, one then wonders why these efforts have not translated to an increase in women's political participation? This calls to mind Isaiah Berlin's two senses of liberty – freedom from, and freedom to. Women can only be free to participate effectively in governance when they are free from all limiting factors. This would therefore lead to an identification of such limiting factors in the next section.

### **Challenges Militating Against Effective Women's Political Participation**

*Other Women:* Women have been acclaimed as their own worst enemies. Many women seek to perpetuate the traditional beliefs that women are less capable in the public sphere, and should be seen, not heard;

*Socio-cultural and Religious Practices:* Two of the major religions in Nigeria, Christianity and Islam have religious injunctions which forbid/limit women's participation in the public sphere;

*Indigenization:* Married female political aspirants are denied support from their birth states of origin and from their husbands' states of birth because they are deemed to have lost their indigene-ship after marriage, or that they are strangers in their husbands' states respectively;

*The feminisation of Poverty:* Politics in Nigeria requires huge financial involvement. Nigerian women lack access to credit, financial backing, and a 2013 study found that 90% of Nigerian women live below the poverty line. This effectively puts the cost of realizing electoral ambitions beyond the reach of the average Nigerian woman;

*Lack of Political Support/Base:* Political parties provide the platform for electioneering and are therefore key to effective political participation. Political parties in Nigeria are male-dominated and male-funded, and women are usually silenced by apportioning them ex-officio and women leader positions, rather than key party positions;

*Prevalence of Double Standards:* The timing and venue for most political meetings also present challenges for women. Meetings typically hold late at night and require a lot of travelling. Where a married or even single woman attempts to ensure her presence at these meetings, she is usually labelled as loose, even by her fellow politicians, when she acts tough, she is 'too harsh', and when she cautions on particular issues, she is labelled 'meek';

*Political Violence and Lawlessness:* The political terrain in Nigeria is fraught with many violent measures including assassinations, intimidations, beatings and maiming (Ugwuegede, 2014). Most times, this atmosphere is less favourable to women.

## **Conclusion**

Praxis has debunked all theoretical claims made that women have the right to equal participation and are therefore not marginalized; or that men are also marginalized by proving that women are more marginalized in the political arena. Given the above examined ethical principles, this paper argues that women should enjoy equitable, effective and efficient political participation, with a resultant effect of increased solidarity and mutual respect for human dignity and the common good. However certain measures need to be put in place to assure such participation, including education, gender quotas, social media mobilization, mandatory social programmes to improve women's welfare, solidarity through women's intersecting identities, state provision of full security for all candidates during electioneering and voting, mandatory training for political parties on internal democracy and gender affairs, and modification of electoral laws and party manifestos to include gender-sensitive provisions.

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