



Violence Against Women In Politics: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

Violence against women in politics is any act of gender – based violence that introduces physical, sexual and psychological harm to women and also debars them from participating in politics. It is internationally recognized as an infringement on women’s political rights. It is one of the greatest hindrances to women’s political participation. Encouraging inclusive political participation is very necessary for democratic consolidation. Violence against women in politics has a deleterious impact on a nation’s growth and also poses a hindrance to the achievement of equality, development and peace. Violence against women in politics impacts on the integrity and legitimacy of electoral and government institutions. This study has set some objectives for itself. First, to examine the causes of violence against women in politics. Second, to identify the impacts of violence against women in politics. Third, to analyze the forms of political violence against women in Nigeria. The secondary means of data collection was employed. The study recommends that security agencies should be adequately trained on how to handle gender – based violence and they should also be equipped to encourage women’s safety and security. Early warning signs of violence should be worked and acted upon to avert electoral violence, as this can have distinct impacts on women.

I. Introduction

Violence against women is the expression of uneven power relations that exist between men and women in private and public spaces. It is portrayed by the use and abuse of power and this seriously is an abuse of women’s fundamental human rights. Violence against women in politics is a hindrance to growth and development because it discourages women political participation. Women who consist of a large proportion of the electorates are usually victims of election violence which is meant to dissuade them from participating in politics. After the 2023 general election, out of

the 1,459 legislative seats that were available at the national assemblies, women won only 75 seats (Thomas – Odia, 2023). A coalition of women groups has blamed this outcome on the violence against women during the election. According to them, there was low turn - out of women voters due to violent attacks meted out on them and this resulted to women winning very few seats in the national assembly (The Guardian, 13th May, 2023). Election is a conventional group decision making process by which a population chooses an individual or persons to hold public office. It is therefore the emblem of democracy and as such should be free and fair and should emphasize on protection of citizen’s rights and freedom. Election has remained a roadway to power and authority. Election in Nigeria is usually characterized by fear, uncertainty and doubts about people’s safety. Violence has remained the hallmark of Nigeria’s elections since independence. Jimoh (2023) rightly points out that many factors, which includes cultural, financial problem and violence against women have greatly affected women’s ability to occupy political offices. Democracy presumes that all, both men and women should have equal opportunity to participate in politics. Violence against Women is known to take place in three contexts, which are in the family, community and the state. Violence against women in elections can discourage them from standing as candidates during election, working as party supporters, observers, election workers, public officials or voters. Violence against women in politics can be effected offline or online by family members, constituents, strangers, political opponents, religious leaders, members of political parties, state actors or the media. According to Olawuyi (2023), the UN Women Nigeria opines that violence against women in elections is one of women’s greatest obstacles to practicing their political rights. The possible victims of violence against women in politics include women voters, women candidates, women electoral officials, women party supporters,



women campaign workers and women media officials. Electoral violence is one of the greatest impediments to women's political participation and it is therefore very necessary to examine how political violence affects women and development. The study has set some objectives for itself. First, to examine the causes of violence against women in politics. Second, to identify the impacts of violence against women in politics. Third, to analyze the forms of political violence against women in Nigeria. The secondary means of data collection was employed.

II. Literature Review

Violence against women in politics is any threat or act that debar women from exercising and actualizing their political rights and human rights. Violence against Women in election has continued to pose as a big barrier to their right to fully participate in politics. The slight increase in women political participation in the last few decades has been accompanied by an increase in the spate of political violence against them. There has been global awareness on the need to address the problem of violence against women in politics. In 2018, the UN General Assembly in its resolution 73/148 reiterated their deep concern about all acts of political violence against women and called all national legislative houses and political parties to initiate and adopt policies that will curb this menace (UN Women, 2021). O'Connell and Ramshaw (2018) rightly surmise that women's equal representation and participation in politics is not only covetable but it is also important for a functioning democracy. This is because a country cannot be said to be practicing democracy when half of the population are tactically debarred from engaging in decision – making. The violence against women in politics resonates the traditional stereotypes and roles given to women, whereby they use domination and control to debar them from political participation. Ballington, Bardall, & Borovsky (2017) point out that a study conducted in Tanzania in 2015 revealed that there were incidences of violence against women because they have different political opinions with their husbands or their communities. According to the report also, some women reported that their voter's cards were destroyed by family members, some were beaten because they supported candidates that their husbands don't support, and some were pressured by their husbands to vote for some candidates, while some men voted for their wives purportedly due to illiteracy. This is due to patriarchal nature of many African countries

whereby women are seen as men's property and as such have to abide by the will and dictates of their owners. Billaud and Dierenberger (2021) rightly maintain that women's confinement to domestic tasks and care work buttress the norm of political participation and economic resources as a male privilege. Beatrice Eyong, the UN Women Country Representative to Nigeria and ECOWAS, reiterated during a post election conference in Abuja titled: Where Do We Stand Regarding Electoral Gender – Based Violence? that there is lack of data on violence against women in politics. According to her, this has affected the ability of advocacy groups to advocate for changes in laws that could protect women from violence during elections (Peoples Gazette, May 15th 2023). Greng (2002) submits that women suffer individual male violence and from male dominated institutions from birth and throughout their life time. Arguing further, he observes that women are denied of political, economic and social power relations due to gender roles which are introduced by men to limit women's rights and opportunities, which are forms of violence against women which are grounded by patriarchy.

Arguing in the same vein, Sagar (2015) rightly pin points that political violence targeted against women, debar them from exercising their political rights and resonates embedded patriarchal values and also erode the integration of women perspectives and experiences in processes of governance. According to UN Women (2021) violence against women in politics impedes political processes and institutions reliability and legitimacy. Arguing further, they note that it can also dissuade them from pursuing or continuing their political careers. During a conference organized by the Canadian Government, Action Aid Nigeria (AAN) and other partners, it was noted that poor participation of women in politics is one of the most frequent forms of violence against women, yet it is most often unrecognized and unacknowledged (Falaju, 2022). Ibizugbe (2023) rightly argues that women shy away from politics due to political malpractice and violence surrounding Nigerian politics. According to Hassan Idayat cited by Zagi (2023), she contends that women are more disinclined to violence and would rather stay away from a violence ridden process; and this has negatively affected women political participation in 2023 election in Nigeria. Blyth (2015) maintains that female politicians and wives of male politicians have experienced increased level of gender – based violence and have also become targets of political violence by political



thugs and criminals. The next section will consider the appropriate theoretical framework.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study will utilize pluralist theory and patriarchal theory. The theorists of pluralism include Robert Dahl, David Truman and Seymour Martin Lipset. The pluralists see politics as a game where competing teams or rivals struggle for victory. Groups develop plan of action or game plan to achieve success. They depend on both conflict and co – operation to succeed. Conflict occurs when one team wins and the other loses (Andrain and Apter, 1995). This is typical of Nigerian politics where rival groups exist and during elections each group has expectations. When their expectations are not met it can lead to violent conflict or protests by their supporters. These usually bring about distinct outcomes for women. When violent conflict arises during election or post election violence, women can be molested and raped as a result of their vulnerability. Also, men harass and intimidate women as a game plan to dissuade them from participating in politics especially when they feel that the woman is more popular than them. Patriarchy is a social system where men hold positions of supremacy and privilege. It is promoted by various propositions which are patriarchal ideology, which is used to promote certain beliefs that suggest that men are superior to women. In a patriarchal society, men control all aspects of the society including politics, economics and women. Men see themselves as rational, active and smarter beings. While they see women as only capable to be care givers and home makers. In a patriarchal system, there is emphasis on the oppression of women. This is one reason women are tactically excluded in politics through various ways including through violent means. They are seen as objects to be controlled and ruled but not to be leaders themselves.

Forms of Violence against Women in Politics in Nigeria

Psychological Violence: This is the most common type of abuse used by men to discourage women from participating in politics. It is the behavior that is meant to threaten and torture perceived opponents and manifest as threats of physical harm and persecution of perceived opponents including candidates, party supporters, election officials and voters. Threats of social exclusion, divorce and rejection by family and friends can discourage women political participation. Psychological violence can happen at

home, in the community or online. A close acquaintance, like husband, family members or actors that are not close to a woman such as the State, political parties, can use psychological violence to discourage women from voting. Types of psychological violence include harassment, character assassination, threat of withdrawal of financial support, divorce, threats against family, cyber bullying, blackmail and negative media representation. Other types of psychological violence include husband or parental pressure regarding choice of who to vote, refusal to grant permission to go for voting exercise, ridicule and shaming. Online violence against women politicians can be evident in different forms such as cyber bullying, manipulation of their pictures, sexualisation of their bodies and defamation of their character. According to a 2016 data collated by Inter Parliamentary Union cited in Fadare (2023), about 55 parliamentarians in 39 countries note that 81.8% of them were affected by psychological abuse, which according to them, includes death threat, rape, beatings and abduction. Online presence through social media can serve as a good medium where female politicians can easily communicate with constituencies and solicit for their support; it also provides a forum where violence can be unleashed with impunity because of its anonymous nature. As at 2022, about more than 108 million Nigerians was using internet making it a widely used device in Nigeria (Tursia and Folorunso, 2023). According to Eniola (2016), during an interview with female Northern politicians, they recounted their experiences in the hands of men, how they were constantly abused and humiliated by men. Mrs Lati Watila, who is an indigene of Hawul Local Government Area of Borno State, contested House of Representative seat in 2015 under All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), recounted how she was humiliated and called names by male politicians. According to her, she was labeled a prostitute and they queried what she is doing there, when she was supposed to be in her husband's house cooking and taking care of the children. In the same vein, Tagwai – Aji, a female politician, who contested primary election to represent Kano Central at the Senate in 2003, also complained that her posters were torn and they complained that they don't want a woman and that she also experienced threats of physical attack. According to her, later the primary election was not done, the party announced to her that Col. HabibuShaibu, a former Military Administrator in Niger State has won the primary election. In the same vein, Ms Indo Pantuvo, 48, who hails from



Takun Local Government Area of Taraba State and who contested primary election for House of Representative seat under Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) recounted how she was bullied and called a prostitute because she ventured into politics. According to her also, they called her unprintable names and queried why a woman will want to rule them. Also, Mrs Najatu Muhammad, the first female Senator in the North narrated her experiences in politics, she maintains that she has been beaten at a conference centre, her clothes were torn and she was left with only her underwear because she is a female politician. According to her also, she has been threatened, she has narrowly escaped death on many occasions and she has also been poisoned many times; all because she ventured into politics which they feel should be left for men alone (Eniola, 2016).

Physical Violence: this is the use of physical force and it can cause injury, harm or even death. It can be in form of pushing, beating, shoving, slapping, hitting, grabbing, kidnapping, stoning or choking. Physical violence can be used by the family, state actors or political parties to oppress women and discourage them from participating in politics. The worst type of physical violence is death and assassination. According to Jimoh (2023), in November 2019, unknown gun men killed a female politician in Kaduna State. Arguing further, she stressed that it was the ninth incident of political killings targeted at female politicians since the 2019 elections. It was reported that former Senator Gbemisola Saraki, one of the nine female Senators between 2003 – 2011, who represented Kwara Central Senatorial District, narrowly escaped death by hired assassins. Former Senator Iyabo Obasanjo also narrowly escaped death by hired assassins (Kehinde, David, 2018). In August 2022, Janet Olapade, who was People's Democratic Party (PDP) women leader in Odigbo Local Government Area of Ondo State was assassinated. Human Rights watch (2019) points out that about 609 persons including women and children were murdered before, during and after 2019 elections. Eno Ben – Udensi, a representative of Pan African Women Projects also notes while observing the election in Rivers State, that women protesters were, tear gassed when they were holding a peaceful protest (Safir and Alam, 2015). She condemned this because according to her, this is an abuse of their right to peaceful protest and this stems from the fact that they are women. Falaju (2002) narrates the ordeal that women who venture into politics face because of their sex. She maintains that during the 2019 election in Kogi

State, that Salome Abuh, a Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) woman was burnt alive. Also, a Labour Party woman leader, Victoria Chintex was reportedly shot dead by unknown gunmen in her residence on 28th November, 2022. Also, during the Gubernatorial election in 2019, Salomeh Abuh, a 60 year old female politician from Kogi State who was a PDP woman leader was burnt to death by political thugs. Natashi Akpoti, also a female politician from Kogi State had her office burnt (The Nation, October 20th, 2021). Mrs. Jennifer Efidi was stabbed in the face in Surulere, Lagos State, when she wanted to cast her vote during the Presidential election of February, 2023 (Folorunsho – Francis, 2023). Ameh (2023) recounted some women's awful experiences during the 2023 election. She submits that Ms Agbaje highlighted some cases of physical abuse suffered by women at a polling unit 18, ward 8, Marte Local Government Area, Borno State. According to her, women were victims of physical violence and this limited their political participation in that unit. In Edo State, a lady was killed at her unit while they were still counting votes. Ette and Akpan – Obong (2022) in their research, interviewed women who were unsuccessful in their run for office. Many of them cited harassment and intimidation by party leaders and godfathers. One respondent narrated how she was attacked with tear gas and also arrested. According to her also, she was nearly kidnapped on the day of primary election. Some of the women narrated incidences where they were verbally abused at party meetings, alleged to be promiscuous and accused of attending political meetings to attract rich men. All these are perpetuated by men so as to discourage women from engaging in politics. Dame Pauline Tallen, a former Deputy Governor of Plateau State, maintains that she has been a victim of violence in election. She contends that she clearly won an election but she was shortchanged because she is a woman. She suggests that women who have been victims of political violence should speak out so that other women will not fall victims (The Guardian, 1st September, 2015)

Sexual Violence: It is non consensual sexual acts or undesired sexual comments or advances which is targeted at a person by any person. It can be in form of sexual assault, rape, sexual threats and harassment. Sexual violence can occur as a result of breakdown of law and order that can occur due to announcement of election result. Sexual violence can be perpetrated in political meetings or events, polling stations or during political rallies. Joyce



Fatai, the former Nasarawa State Commissioner for Women Affairs and Social Development, maintains that it is difficult to document cases of sexual violence due to a culture of silence surrounding it. Orji and Uzodi (2012) observe that the post – election violence of 2011 resulted in rape, gang rape and defilement of some female corp members. According to a research conducted by Lagos – based NGO, Stand to End Rape (STER) , between October 2021 and April 2022, about one - fifth of female respondents aver that they have to accede to sexual favour as participants at the political space (Jimoh, 2023).Orude (2011) submits that during the post – election violence of 2011 that some hoodlums raped and murdered indefinite number of female corp members. Whenever there is political violence, some miscreants will hide under the guise of confusion in the system and rape ladies because of their vulnerable nature. Uduh (2019) rightly observes that men and women face harassment during campaigns but for women the harassment is usually pervasive and sexualized.Ogbonnaya and Okenyodo (2022) aver that in 2019, two political women leaders were killed and some female election officials including female security personnel were raped.

Causes of Violence against Women in Politics

Gender Stereotypes: this is one of the reasons women are criticized and even worked against any time they are involved in politics. The society see politics as a domain for men which women should not even dare to enter. For instance, women seeking political offices, according to Safir and Alam (2015) are subjected to harassment, intimidation and assault to hinder them from participating in politics. Women who find it difficult to endure the unpleasant treatment may be put off permanently from political participation.

Patriarchal Values: there is strong ideology of gender bias grounded by the customs and traditions that see women as passive and irrational and therefore not fit to be in politics and governance. The characteristics of patriarchal culture include male supremacy, male recognition, male centeredness and male obsession with control. In a patriarchal society, men are identified with strength, control and competitiveness and therefore should be leaders in both the private and public spheres. The dominance of men in almost every sphere of life is a major obstacle to women ability to raise needed fund for political participation (Safir and Alam, 2015).

Lack of Access to Resources: this is one of the secondary causes of violence against women

in politics. Women lack critical resources like education and finance which are highly needed in politics. In Nigeria, politics is highly expensive, cost of nomination forms and campaign cost is very high and far above what most women can afford. For instance, according to Anyaele cited in Edeme (2022), in preparation for the 2023 elections, the two major political parties, All Progressive Congress(APC) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) sold their presidential nomination forms at 100 million and 40 million respectively. Men introduce monetized politics to discourage women from participating in politics and thereby perpetuating violence against women. Right of inheritance in most culture in Nigeria also give men superiority above women in property ownership with the consequence of women finance.

Time Poverty: Domestic duties are usually combined with formal jobs by women thus limiting the time available for them to engage in politics. According to The World’s Women (2015), women in developed and developing world spend on average as much as 2 and 3.4 times hours a day on unpaid work more than men. Arguing in the same vein, Hyde, Greene and Darmstadt (2020) submit that even as female participation in paid jobs increase, majority of women across the world continue to render majority of unpaid work. They further contend that unequal gender - based allocation of unremunerated domestic work, represents ‘double duty’ for women who are in the work force and it frequently leaves them with little or no discretionary time. Kelly (2019) points out that political meetings are usually held at night and that due to the fact that women are disproportionately burdened with house chores, this makes it difficult for them to attend. Men introduce long political meetings at night to discourage women from political participation and this is considered as a kind of violence against women in politics

Religion: the Bible or Koran is sometimes misinterpreted by male leaders to discourage women political participation. Women are made to believe that they are not made to lead anywhere and that they are created to be subordinates to men. According to the Holy Bible in 1 Corinthians 14 verse 34 – 36, Paul instructed women not to speak in the church and that they should be submissive. If they have questions, they should ask their husbands at home. Ademiluka (2017) argues that Paul later contradicted himself because he had many women preachers whom he used to propagate the word of God. Nevertheless, this bible verse continue to



serve as impetus to relegate women in the society and in politics.

Impacts of Violence against Women in Politics

Women who consist of half of the population will withdraw from participating in political processes. Their perspectives and interests will not be factored in, in policy making. Therefore, decision making will be skewed in the favour of men only. UN Women (2018) submitted that violence against women in politics would deprive women of their political rights while they will be underrepresented in the process of decision-making.

Violence against women in politics is an abuse of their fundamentally human right. Women, like men, are constitutionally accorded the right to live, right to vote and be voted for. Attempt by hooligans to scare women is to deprive them and make them irrelevant. Violence against women in politics violates and undermines the realization of their human rights and the attainment of SDGs agenda (UNICEF, 2023; Women for Women International, 2022).

Besides, physical harm is a major danger associated with political violence. Ajanaku (2015) identified physical harm as one of the consequences of electoral violence which is capable of killing the interests of women in politics. Safir and Alam (2015) reported the attacks on women politicians and wives of male politicians by thugs and criminals preceding the 2015 election. The fear of physical harm would incapacitate women with desire for political participation. Similarly, the Women Leader of Labour Party in Daura Local Government Area of Kaduna State, Mrs. Victoria Chintex, was killed by gunmen before the 2023 general election (Jannamike, 2023).

The government in power will also lack legitimacy as they will not be accepted because a good number of the citizens that they are governing didn't participate in the political processes that brought them in. Other implication of violence against women in politics is recycling of leadership among the male elites with the stereotype of men domination of women (International IDEA Technical Paper 1, 2021; UNDP, 2023). Women would be scared off as a result of fear of assaults, assassination and other ills associated with violence.

It is believed that engagement of women in politics would enhance accountability of representatives. Violence against women in politics would further worsen the challenge of

accountability of political representatives to the electorates. UNDP (2023) submitted that women representatives would be more accountable to their constituencies thereby enhance good governance through transparency and responsiveness.

Violence against women in politics and the attendant effect of low representatives of women would compound the challenge of development. This is due to the fact that women, which constitute half of the population, are not involved in decision making processes and governance. Decisions and policy would lack inclusiveness needed for overall development. Neglecting a large proportion of the population and their interests, would to a large extent impair sustainable development.

III. Conclusion

In the last three decades, there has been increased international attention to the acts of political violence perpetrated against women by men. It has also been discovered that there is a link between political violence and women's low level of political participation. Low level of women political participation implies that half of the population does not participate actively in decision making; and this has implications for development. Political violence against women also has negative implications for the sustenance of our democracy. For the country to achieve the objectives of peace, equality, development and progress, there is need to engage all, to be fully involved in decision making and work towards the attainment of sustaining development goals.

IV. Recommendations

- Security agencies should be adequately trained on how to handle gender – based violence and they should also be equipped to encourage women's safety and security. Women should also learn the acts of self defense in case of any attack. Such act would send signals to men who nurse the intention to scare women with threats of attacks.
- Early warning signs of violence should be worked and acted upon to avert electoral violence, as this can have distinct impacts on women.
- There is need to punish perpetrators of political violence against women so as to serve as a deterrent to those who might want to engage in the same act. Failure to bring perpetrators to book is a major reason for assaults and attacks on women. Stricter punishment, such as life imprisonment, should be made the penalty for assaulting women who show interest in politics.



- The mass media should advocate for peace and equality and also speak out against all forms of gender – based political violence through their various channels. Intense awareness of women place in development should be emphasized by INEC, government and non-governmental organisations. Men in politics should also shun selfish interest and join to publicise the role of women in politics and development.
- Religious institutions should preach against political violence against women to their congregation. Since violence is against peace, teachers and preachers should emphasise the evil of violence and warn their congregation to desist from such acts.
- The electoral body should be transparent in all their undertakings in order to conduct a free and fair election. This is because violent attacks are sometimes initiated by people who are angered by the fact that the election was rigged. Violence attacks usually result to distinct outcomes for women
- Women should build solidarity and learn to support themselves by forming coalitions
- Government should come up with policies to fight against violence against women in politics. They should also develop the political will to implement the policies

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