

Women Under-Representation in Politics, Factors Responsible: A Case of Yobe State

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Abstract

Women are under-represented in political institutions globally. In Nigeria and Yobe State in particular, under-representation of women is glaring at the executive, legislative and judicial arms of government. Anchored on the theory of empowerment, this research evaluates women's under-representation in politics: factors responsible for the predicament in Yobe State. The objective of the study is to identify the factors responsible for women's under-representation in Yobe; explore the consequences of women's under-representation in politics and develop strategies that will increase participation of women in decision making process. A qualitative research design was adopted and an In-depth interview method was used to elicit data from 20 Key Information Informants across Yobe State particularly from ministry of women affairs and women in business. The study found that under-representation of women in Yobe State is caused by patriarchy, coercion, cultural/religious barriers, stigma, godfatherism, lack of interest and intimidation/threats. It also discovered that the consequences of women's under-representation in politics include inequality, poverty, loss of voice, anti-women policies and erosion of democratic values and principles. The study concludes that women are totally not represented in Yobe State politics, and recommended strategies to turn the tide, including combating cultural/ religious barriers, mentorship, adoption of quota system, increased advocacy, direct primaries and a policy of free nomination forms for female contestants. Findings from this study are a reference point to policy makers, academics and non-governmental organizations, women themselves and other stake holders that are relevant to the field.

Keywords: Women, Politics, Under-representation, Marginalization and Empowerment

Introduction

Women under-representation in politics is one of the most disturbing political phenomena globally. Several efforts have been made by political scientists, policy makers and civil society organizations to address the issue. Notably among the efforts were the declaration made at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, which advocated 30% affirmative action, and the National Gender Policy (NGP) recommendation of 35% affirmative action for a more inclusive representation of women both in elective and appointive positions.

In spite of these, however, women are still being marginalized partly due to the style of leadership inherent in various countries. Agbalajobi (2010), opined that women constitute over half of the world's population and contribute in crucial ways to the growth and development of society. Women's participation in politics is a very germane issue around the world both in developed and developing countries. As a group, women and their potential contributions to political development, economic advancement, social progress, and environmental protection

have been marginalized (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008). For instance, only 16 countries worldwide currently have female heads of state or government (UN Women, 2021).

Furthermore, the United Nations Women Calculation (2021) and Kock-Mehrin (2018) highlight that at the current rate of progress, gender parity in ministerial positions will not be achieved before 2077, with a mere 0.52% increase per year. The situation remains the same in Nigeria as women are scarcely noticeable in the country's political chronicle. A woman has no time been elected president, vice president, or governor since 1960 when Nigeria got her independence (Awofeso and Odeyemi, 2014; Idike et al., 2020; Olurode, 2013; Quadri, 2015).

The 2023 elections in the Africa's largest economy further confirmed women's predicament as far as under-representation is concerned. Infact, as noted by Nkereuwem (2023), the number of women in Nigeria's National Assembly has dropped by 19 percent compared to the last assembly, with women now occupying 3 percent of seats at the Senate and 4 percent of seats at the House of Representatives. In Yobe State, Northeastern Nigeria, no woman has ever represented any constituency at the State House of Assembly since it was established in 1991. Although two women have won two House of Representative's seats in the state and others currently hold political appointments, the jinx at the state House of Assembly has yet to be broken. The implication of this is that for over 30 years, there has been a systematic marginalization of women who constitute at least half of the state population. Again, laws and policies implemented in the state within the period may not necessarily be in the interest of women.

Nigerian politics became male-dominated almost making the women virtually politically unseen. This inequality and unfairness have therefore been perceived by different people especially the women folk as an attempt to erode their fundamental rights (Uwa, et al., 2018). However, it needs to be stressed that women's political right remains an integral part of human rights and women's rights generally are an inevitable aspect of any democratic framework. Gender equality and women's empowerment are not only human rights, but they are also essential for achieving inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development. Women's political participation is central to these goals, and political parties, media, and civil society organizations are among the most important institutions for promoting and nurturing such participation (Clark, 2012).

Conceptual Clarification

Politics

Politics has no any universally accepted definition as the concept has been viewed in different perspectives by scholars who have written on the subject matter extensively. Heywood (1997) inextricably linked politics to the phenomenon of conflict and cooperation, when he defined politics as the art of government, a phenomenon which relates to public affair, a means of resolving conflicts either by compromise, conciliation or negotiation, rather than through force and naked power. Sodaro (2001:27) share this view by defining politics as the process by which communities pursue collective goals and deal with their conflicts authoritatively by means of government.

Easton (1990) defines politics as the, "authoritative allocation of values" in a political system. By this Easton sees politics as encompassing the various processes through which government

responds to the pressures and demands of allocating benefits, rewards or penalties in a society. This is why Lasswell (1958) sees politics as the determination of who gets what, when and how. It is however observed that the various definitions above consider the concept of politics from the view point of the normative function of politics which is the resolution of conflict of interests.

However, it is necessary that its non-normative definitions of politics be also put to bear. In doing so, the concept of politics will not just be limited to the view of the developed countries but will also be relevant to the context of the developing countries particularly Africa. A holistic approach to the concept of politics is therefore observed by Williams' (1980:69) view of politics from two perspectives. Firstly, that politics is a discreditable activity whose virtue is the competitive pursuit of private interests and secondly, that politics is concerned with the administration of the common affairs of the public, a matter of universal rather than particular concern, whose aim is defining and promoting the common goods.

Women Under-Representation

Women under-representation in politics refers to the systematic and persistent inadequate representation of women in positions of power and authority. It is a discriminatory practice that discourages women's leadership and representation in decision making process (Awusietal., 2023). This under-representation is evident at all levels of government from local to national and across all branches of government, including the executive, legislature and judiciary.

Theoretical Framework

The research anchored on the theory of empowerment to understand the various strategies that could be employed to enhance women's legislative representation in Nigeria and Yobe State in particular. Empowerment theory is a social theory that emphasizes the importance of increasing the power of individuals and communities to improve their lives. It is based on the belief that people have the potential to take control of their own destinies and create positive change, but that they are often disempowered by social, political, and economic factors. Many empowerment theorists have argued that empowerment takes on multiple forms across people, it is contextually embedded, and shifts over time (Foster-Fishman et al., 1998; Rappaport, 1984; Zimmerman, 1990, 1995). Despite the obvious divergent views and definitional laxity associated with empowerment, there appears to be a seeming consensus among theorists that empowerment is a multidimensional construct, which occurs within multiple dimensions such as sociological, psychological, economic, political; and at different levels, individual, group and community (Hur, 2006 in Addae, 2021).

Methodology

Both primary and secondary source of data are used

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1 What are the factors responsible for women under-representation in Yobe State?

Figure 5

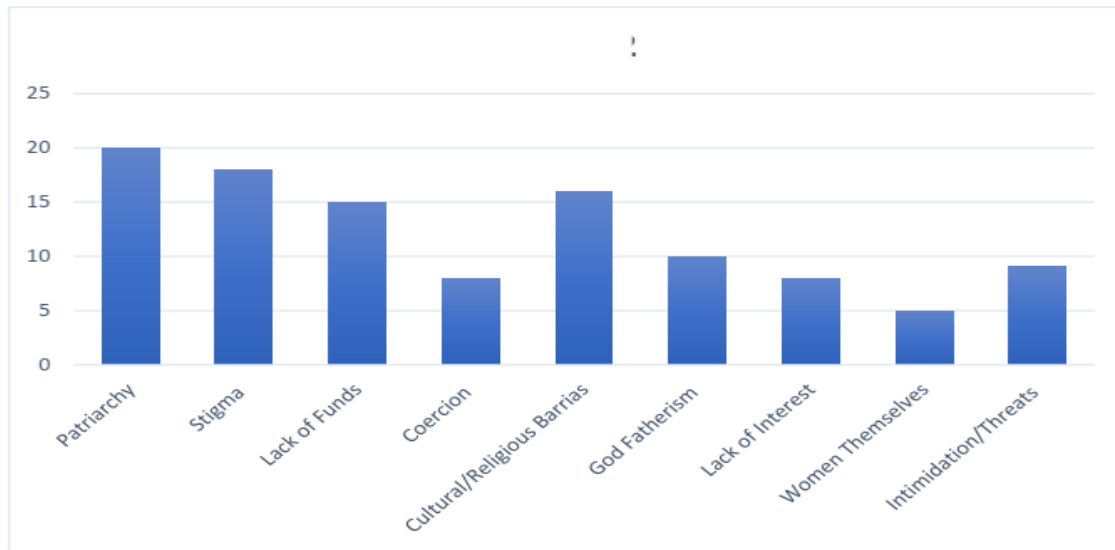


Figure 1 illustrates nine reasons given by key informants, which are responsible for women's under-representation in Yobe State House of Assembly of the nine reasons, 20 informants, constituting 18.3%, believed that patriarchy is the major cause of women under-representation. 18 informants (16.5%) said stigma of being tagged as loose is responsible for women underrepresentation, while 16 informants (14.7%) identified cultural and religious barriers as the reasons for the under-representation. Lack of funds is also identified by 15 informants (13.8%) as the cause of women under-representation. 10 informants (9.2%) blamed women under-representation on god fatherism, 9 informants (8.3%) said fear of intimidation/threats are responsible for women under-representation and 8 informants (7.3%) believe coercion is responsible for women under-representation. 8 informants (7.3%), blamed women under-representation on lack of interest in politics among women, while 5 informants (4.6%) said the attitudes of women themselves are responsible for their under-representation in politics.

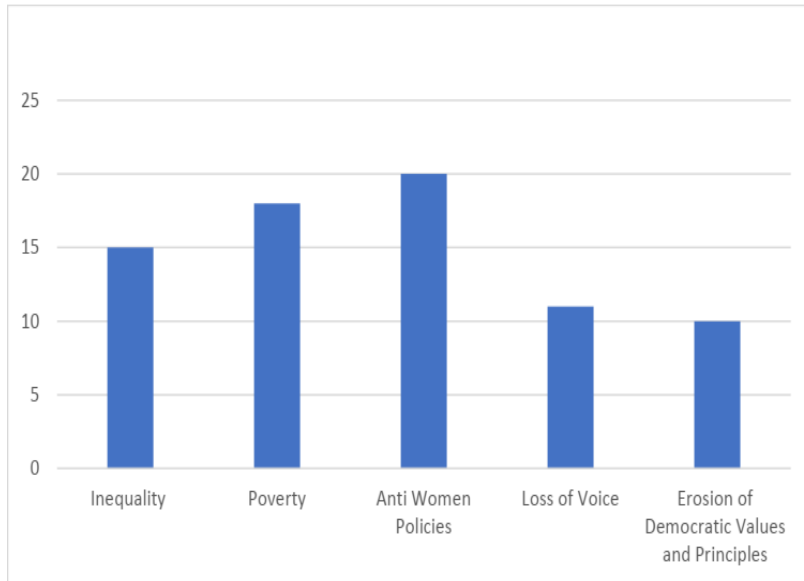
Discussion of findings

- 1 **Patriarchy:** Male domination is the major impediment to women representation in Yobe State. Women in Yobe like in many other part of the north, are largely controlled by their husbands, parents and other male relatives. Finding from this research corroborated this assertion as key informants opined that male politicians in Yobe see women as inferior and are therefore, not entitled to equal rights and opportunities with their male counterparts in terms of access to political and appointive positions in government. Patriarchy in Yobe politics is deeply entrenched in culture and religion, constituting a major challenge to women who are interested in contesting for elective positions.
- 2 **Stigma of being tagged as loose/wayward:** In Yobe, the stigma of being labelled as wayward and sometimes even prostitutes is another factor that discourages women from participating in political process, including contesting for seats in Yobe State House of Assembly. This phenomenon is closely linked to well establish cultural norms and religious injunctions that limit the roles of women largely to domestic chores and child upbringing. With the exception of emergencies and essential needs, interaction between a

woman and a man who is neither her husband nor her relation is generally unacceptable in Yobe. Finding in the research shows that many women who are qualified to run for elective positions don't show interest in them due to fear of stigma, and women who already broke the ceiling and engaged in active politics are forced to put up with the stigma or withdraw.

- 3 **Lack of funds:** Men are usually of good financial standing than women in most parts of Yobe, and so most women do not have enough capital and other resources needed to compete with men in elections that are mostly capital intensive. Most women in Yobe are low income earners partly as a result of subjugation to domestic duties. This negatively affects their adequate participation in politics to occupy leadership positions. Even when they succeed, it is most likely that they have been assisted by some powerful men in the society. Findings further show that many women still depend on men financially or otherwise for means of sustenance and livelihood.
- 4 **Coercion:** Coercion refers to force used mostly by male politicians to compel their female counterparts to make certain political decisions even against their will. Findings from key informants indicate that some women who contested for primary elections under certain political parties in 2019, were forced to withdraw in favour of male politicians who eventually won the respective parties' primaries, became candidates and subsequently won legislative seats in Yobe House of Assembly. One of the women who is also an informant in this research, said she, in fact, won a primary election under a certain political party to represent a state constituency in Yobe North, but the party officials forced her to withdraw and relinquish her mandate in favour of a man. Therefore, the use of force by political parties, their financiers and even government officials hinders women representation in Yobe politics.
- 5 **Cultural/religious barriers:** The research found that culture and religion are key twin determiners of all endeavours, including politics in Yobe. Both culture and religion have assigned certain roles and responsibilities for both men and women, and any attempt by a woman to engage in active politics, which is generally perceived as a male domain, is seen as a deviation from established cultural and religious norms and values.
- 6 **God Fatherism:** Findings in the study have shown that God Fatherism phenomenon significantly influences politics in Yobe. Most if not all of the legislators in Yobe House of Assembly enjoyed the support of powerful politicians and top government officials before emerging victorious. Most women don't have the privilege of having political godfathers who in most cases determine who wins elections. In a situation whereby these highly influential politicians are men, high chan
- 7 **Women themselves:** The study also discovered that women themselves contribute to their predicaments. Key informants have recounted how some women who are in privileged positions to contest and win elections don't show interest in politics. Similarly, there are reported incidents in which women that have either won primary elections or are in a pole position to do so, allowed themselves to be bribed or bought over by men. These categories of defeatist women contribute to women's underrepresentation in politics, and indirectly aiding and abetting gender inequality in politics.

Research Question 2: What are the effects of women under-representation in politics?



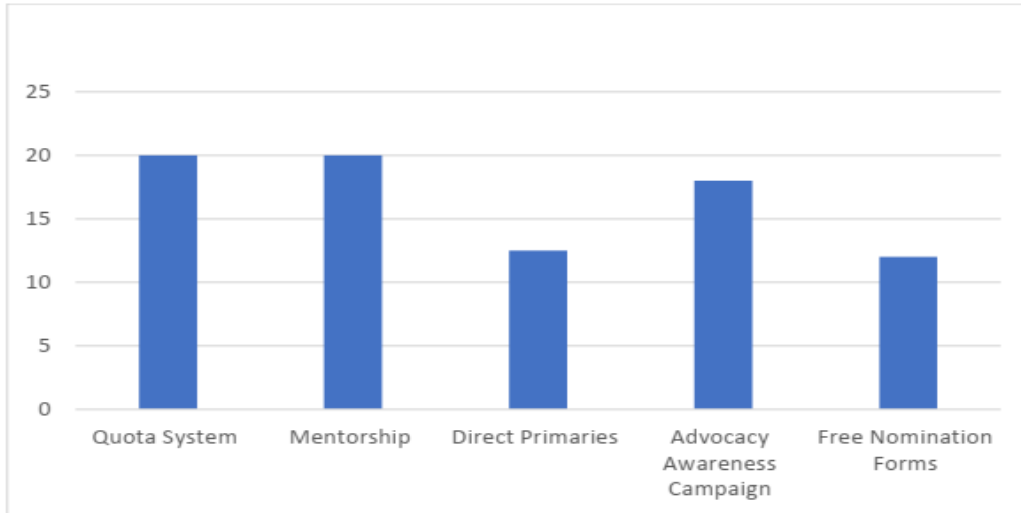
Discussion of findings in figure 2

- 1. Gender Inequality:** The study found that women under-representation in politics further widens the already existing gap or inequality between men and women in terms of access to development opportunities in all spheres of life. This is a huge setback to efforts being made by state and non-state actor to address the inequalities. Key informants are of the view that gender inequality is a clog in the wheel of progress of women, and further compounds their already appalling conditions. They are of the view that if women occupy more leadership positions in the society, they will show more passion and willingness to empower women. This will help in no small measure in reducing the gap between men and women in terms of development opportunities and access to societal values and resources.
- 2. Anti-women policies:** The study found that continuous male domination leads to formulation of policies that are not in the interest of women. A key informant cited as an example a previous policy formulated by Yobe State government, that involved the conversion of some female boarding secondary schools today secondary schools across the state. She said as a result of the policy, many girls whose parents were not residents of areas where the schools were located, had to drop out of the schools because they couldn't be day students in schools far away from their home towns and villages.
- 3. Poverty** Key informants in this study overwhelmingly blamed poverty and deprivation among women on under-representation in politics. Poverty exists massively among many women in Yobe partly due to male biased policies and programmes, which in many cases inflict suffering on women. They believe that if more women have access to leadership positions, they will no doubt support fellow women through empowerment and financial assistance.
- 4. Loss of voice:** The study found that the principles of equality and freedom that characterised democracy are under threat as women who constitute more than half of Yobe state's population don't have adequate saying the way and manner their affairs are

being managed. The research gathered that underrepresentation of women in politics and its attendant marginalization and discrimination discourages women from adequately participating in political process. The feeling shared by key informants in the study

Research Question 3: What are the factors that will increase women representation in Yobe State?

Figure 7



Discussion of findings in figure 3

- 1. Quota system:** Quota system which guarantees proportionate representation of men and women in politics is unanimously advocated by key informants as the ideal strategy for ensuring increased women political representation in Yobe State. The study reveals that inherent vulnerabilities of women due to economic, social and religious factors, as highlighted above, undermine their chances in an open contest with their male counterparts.
- 2. Mentorship:** The study reveals that there is an urgent need for political parties, government agencies and nongovernmental organisations to invest in building the capacities of female politicians in Yobe state to effectively participate in politics .Key informants in this study recommend pairing of prospective female politicians with established and more experienced female politicians, to mentor them ahead of forthcoming elections.
- 3. Advocacy and awareness campaign:** Key informants suggested for more concerted efforts in terms of advocacy and awareness campaign on the need for more women to key into politics as the surest way of improving their living conditions.
- 4. Free nomination forms:** The study found that a deliberate policy by all political parties in Nigeria to make nomination forms free for all female contestants will go a long way in addressing women’s under representation in politics.
- 5. Direct primaries:** The study found that indirect party primaries, which are capital intensive, are being used by male politicians as an instrument of dominating and

marginalizing women. It all boils down to the fact that indirect primaries or the delegates system mostly favours male politicians who command a lot of influence and are in good financial standing.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the political terrain and act of governance in Yobe do not support mass women's political participation and representation. The danger here is the perpetual inequality between men and women in terms of access to equal rights and opportunities in all spheres of life. As a consequence of this, poverty and anti-women policies will continue to gain ground as more and more women will be voiceless, become discouraged about participating in active politics, and democratic principles and values will be eroded in the end.

Recommendation

The study, therefore, recommends the following as measures to address women's underrepresentation in Yobe State

- i. There is an urgent need for building mass coalition of women support and advocacy groups such as non-governmental organisations and women's associations to mobilize and garner support for female candidates before and during elections.
- ii. Government at all levels should create an enabling environment that allows women to engage meaningfully in decision making process in government agencies and institutions in Yobe, free of harassment, violence and intimidation.
- iii. Political parties, government and civil society organizations are enjoined to establish a trust fund dedicated to supporting female politicians during elections and also to challenge electoral malpractice meted against them.
- iv. Effective quota system as a gender equality measure should be initiated at all levels of government. Relevant stakeholders in electoral process such as the Independence National Electoral Commission (INEC) and political parties must be identified and engaged to ensure that there is strict compliance to quota system.
- v. More advocacies and sensitisation campaigns should be taken to the grass to mobilize women for political participation.
- vi. Political parties should build the capacity of prospective female aspirants by pairing them with established women politicians to mentor them ahead of forthcoming elections.
- vii. The media should be encouraged to set an agenda around supporting women to participate in politics.

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