

Female Senators and the Empowerment of Women since The First Republic

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the women-centric actions, laws and policies championed by female senators in Nigeria since the first republic (1963). It argues that female participation is a major indicator of the political, social and economic development of a society but this is seldom the case. Women are still under-represented in leadership roles across many countries in spite of apparently evolving political systems that claim to be more liberal and all-inclusive. The need for women's empowerment cannot be overemphasized as it has a ripple effect on society in enhancing their ability to determine their choices and right to influence social change for themselves and society, and by so doing, their sense of self-worth is enhanced. However, Nigeria remains one of the countries performing poorly with respect to closing the gender gap despite numerous efforts made over the years, especially in relation to political empowerment. With the use of both oral and secondary sources, this paper identified five (5) female senators who made remarkable impacts towards women empowerment across their senatorial zones and their states by extension. Some of the women empowerment programmes they championed were; training and mentoring of female political aspirants, provisions for skill acquisition programmes along with start-up capitals, disbursement of cash, free health interventions, educational scholarships, donation of relief items in times of distress, and most importantly, the passing of bills into law that protects the rights of the girl-child against; gender discrimination and sexual violence against women. In the midst of persisting challenges hindering female participation in political affairs, this paper recommended adequate mentoring of aspiring women, providing financial assistance, when necessary, full implementation of affirmative action/quota system, and a change of attitude of media groups towards women as possible panacea to some the numerous challenges bedeviling Nigerian girl-child/women.

Keywords: *Female, Senators, Empowerment, First Republic.*

Introduction

The global population census in 2021 was 7.89 Billion with women constitution 49.7 % of the total population.¹ In other words, it shows that about half of the population

are women thereby creating a balance of power between genders by their participation. This is said to be an indicator of development in any society. The optimal participation of women in public life is highly paramount to building and maintaining a strong and vibrant democracy. The possibility of laws and policies serving the interest of women or empowering them is slim if not impossible when they are not encouraged to actively participate in the political processes of their society. Over the years, the number of women serving in elected and appointed political positions has steadily increased. For instance, in Canada, Finland, Rwanda, South Africa and the United States of America. Trends across the globe have indicated slow-paced progress in closing the gender gaps across major facets of human development in different countries. Nigeria for instance, remains one of the countries performing poorly with respect to closing the gender gaps, especially in relation to political empowerment.

In 2020, Nigeria was ranked 145 out of 153 and in the following year (2021), it was 149 out of the same 153 countries surveyed under the political empowerment category. For women's representation in parliament, Nigeria is ranked 184 out of the 187 countries assessed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2021.²

This makes Nigeria to be place among the last ten (10) poor-performing countries in the world under this category most likely to be regarded as a failing state. Since Nigeria's first republic, the increase in women's participation has been remarkable in terms of the number of women who voted in elections, the number of public offices held by women as well as the number of women-related policies executed by the government. There is still a glary level of under-representation of women as compared with men despite the fact that sections of the Nigerian constitution have made provisions for women's civic and political participation.³ The representation of women currently in the Ninth (9th) National Assembly is 4.47% (which is 21 out of the 469 legislators). The highest number of women in the National Assembly was in 2007, with thirty-six (36) female members out of 469 legislators standing at 7.6%. Currently, there are fifteen (15) states in Nigeria have been governed without a female member in their Houses of Assembly.⁴ This reality shows that Nigeria is heading to an almost all-male legislative house if effective and timely measures are not put in place to stem the tide and guarantee women's representation in elective offices. Since the first republic, a handful of women in Nigeria who have occupied elective and appointive positions have strongly played a role in showing that women's participation is fundamental in driving sustainable development in any society. A good example of their achievements is in the area of women empowerment which has yielded a lot of positive results. It is against this backdrop that this study aims to examine the activities of women empowerment as spearheaded by female senators in Nigeria.

Definition of Terms

Senators: They are simply members or legislators of a senate. Their constitutional powers are, proposing legislation, drafting and amending bills, oversight of the federal

budget, and the executive branch by approving or rejecting presidential appointees for agencies.⁵ Constitutions provide several unique functions for the Senate one such enables checks and balances amongst other functions. Some of their duties include but are not limited to advising the executive and consenting or rejecting appointments of the executive, deliberating on national issues and policies etc.⁶

Women Empowerment: Women empowerment can be simply defined as actions geared towards enhancing the capacity and participation of women in terms of political, social and economic activities for the purpose of their self and national development. Simply put, it is a way of reducing the dependency and vulnerability of women in all spheres of life. In another definition, empowerment in the Nigerian context is simply an economic process that involves empowering Nigerian women as a poverty reduction measure.⁷

The United Nations further defines women's empowerment as a process by which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices. In addition, they explained that women's empowerment has five (5) components which are; women's sense of self-worth, their right to have and to determine choices, their right to have access to opportunities and resources, their right to have power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home, and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order both nationally and internationally.⁸

This therefore implies that education, training, raising awareness, increasing access to and control over resources, expansion of choices, as well as actions to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and prolong gender discrimination and inequality are important tools for empowering women and girls to claim their rights.⁹

Political Participation: This involves more than just voting. According to the United Nations, it is a derivative of the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate, the ability to partake in the conduct of political affairs, the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all level of government. In addition, under international standards, both women and men have an equal right to participate fully in all aspects of the political process.¹⁰ According to Uhlaner, political participation refers to voluntary activities undertaken by the citizens to influence public policy, either directly or by the selection of person(s) to represent them. Instances of political participation include voting in elections, participating in political campaigns, donating money to a candidate or cause, contacting officials, petitioning, protesting and working with other people on issues etc.¹¹

Overview and Emergence of Nigerian Women in Political Participation since the First Republic

In the midst of increasing statistics across Africa, Nigeria has not only failed to make significant progress in women representation in parliament and ministerial appointment, but it has experienced a steady retrogression in global ranking. Before the era of colonial rule, women were a fundamental part of the political setting across different communities. In the Northern region (Bornu & Zaria for example), women played dynamic roles in the administration of the state, to the extent of making up for the roles played by male counterparts. In Yorubaland, the Obas ruled with the assistance of a handful of women referred to as traditional chiefs. Some of them were great amazons who exhibited strength and bravery in the politics of Ife and Benin Kingdoms. Examples of towns and kingdoms where ladies participated in political roles were Ife, Oyo, Zazzau (now Zaria), Daura, Akure, Bonny etc.¹²

During the colonial period, things became worse as women were disenfranchised in 1922, when the Hugh Clifford Constitution disenfranchised women and even limited the participation of adult male to the wealthy. This continued until the 1950s when women in Southern Nigeria were given the franchise which led to an appointment of three (3) women into the House of Chiefs. They were Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margaret Ekpo and Janet Mokuolu. In the first republic, shortly after Nigeria gained her independence from the British colonialists, there were records where women began to play active roles. For example in 1960, Miss Wuraola Esan from Western Nigeria became the first member of the parliament; Margaret Ekpo became a member of the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly from 1961 to 1966; Miss Janet Mokuolu and Miss Ekpo A. Young also became members of the Eastern House of Assembly.¹³ But unfortunately in the Northern region, women were still denied the right to vote and be voted for until 1979 when the country returned to civilian government.

The second republic which was from 1979 to 1983 recorded a slight increase in the participation of women in politics as few of them were elected into the State House of Assembly and House of Representatives. Only two women (2) were appointed Federal Ministers of Internal Affairs and National Planning, these were Chief (Mrs.) Janet Akinrinade and Mrs. Adenike Ebun Oyagbola respectively. In addition, there was only one permanent secretary and a number of them were commissioners in the states too. Ms. Franca Afegbua, in 1983 was the only woman elected into the Senate while very few other women contested and won elections at the local government councils within this period.¹⁴

When General Buhari became the military head of state in 1983, the first quota system was introduced with respect to appointing women into governance. He directed that at least a female must be appointed an Executive Council member in each state in Nigeria. Consequently, every state complied with this order, and even some states had two (2) to three (3) female members. In 1986, the General Babangida Administration established a political Bureau to carry out a comprehensive review of the political and socio-economic system of Nigeria to acknowledge a gender gap. The review committee

recommended that five (5) legislative seats be reserved for women at all levels of government. But the Babangida administration rejected it.¹⁵ In the early 1990s, two (2) women were appointed deputy governors (Latifat Okunu of Lagos and Pamela Sadauku of Kaduna).¹⁶

In the third republic, there were no female governors elected at the state level in the 1990 transition elections. Only one (1) woman emerged as Chairperson of the Local Government Council in the Western region. Only two (2) female governors emerged in Lagos and Cross River States. Only one (1) was elected to the Senate after the 1992 Senatorial election. In 1993 General Babangida appointed two (2) women into the transitional council. Two female ministers were appointed to the cabinet under Ernest Shonekan. Generals Sani Abacha and Abdulsalami Abubakar also had a good number of female ministers and members of their cabinets.¹⁷

When the 4th Republic began in 1999, only three (3) were elected into the Senate and 12 to the House of Representatives. Eight years later (2009) the number of women in the Senate increased to eight but dropped to seven in 2011. The same number of women was elected into the Senate in 2015 while 20 were elected into the House of Representatives. In the next election that took place in 2019, the number of women in the lower chamber dropped from 20 to 11. Generally, the national average for the participation of women has been around 6% for elective and appointive offices which placed Nigeria below the West African Sub-regional average of 15%. Later in 2021, Nigeria had a 10.3% representation of women in ministerial positions (standing at 3 out of 29) and 5.8% among parliament members, thereby making it ranked 149 out of 155 on political empowerment according to the WEF Global Gender Report. The same report placed Nigeria at 139th out of 156 with 63% in the gender gap.¹⁸ The general percentage of women in political participation has been very low compared to the percentage of men. This has continued to remain a status quo, despite efforts being made to either promote gender equality, implement empowerment strategies, or even support political participation.

In 2016 and 2017, there were 73 men in the National Assembly (Senate) and only six (6) women, while in 2018 and 2019, there were 72 men and only seven (7) women were represented. Six (6) women occupied positions of committee chairpersons and only a woman was a minority senate leader.¹⁹ This, therefore, implies that females in Nigerian politics are a minority. In Kano, according to the Sunday Punch Newspaper, no woman has ever been elected into the state House of Assembly or even to the National House of Representatives. As of 2019, 17 Northern States did not record any elected women into their Houses of Assembly and the two (2) major political parties did not even have a female candidate for the National Assembly across all the states in the Northern Region.²⁰ After a legislative election in 2019, the Nigerian Senate elected only eight (8) women out of 109 members (representing 7.3%), while the House of Representatives elected only thirteen (13) women out of 360 members (representing 3.61%). These figures were said to have fallen below the global average of 26.1 of women in parliament, and the objective of gender parity.²¹

Undoubtedly, Nigeria has advocated and even implemented some strategies, some of which include “special measures to correct women’s historical under-representation in political decision-making; adoption and adequate implementation of electoral quotas for women combined with Human Rights education in the field of gender equality; securing the right of women and empowerment in all areas of life which include education and family status so that they can totally participate in political life”.²² After all, these have been given attention, Nigeria recently experienced the rejection of five (5) Gender Equality Bills by the National Assembly, which consequently weakens their strong support to participate in electoral offices. Over time, Bills seeking to promote women’s empowerment and gender equality have suffered a series of setbacks like outright rejection and it is believed to likely face the same rejection again in subsequent Senate-Assembly hearings due to what its opponents dub *socio-cultural and Islamic concerns* identified in the content of the Bills. Although there are contents in the Bill advocating for;

eliminations of all forms of discrimination against women, gender-based violence, provision of the legal basis upon which there will be formed, structured and institutional responses to provide rights of men and women and the equality of all persons and opportunities availed to all citizens including all people with disabilities, encouraging women to aspire and attain their full potentials considering the fact that there are real and partial forms of discrimination against women; as well as to avail equal opportunities of career choices, growth and promotion, job security and treatment in work value especially as it relates to women’s right to be paid maternity leave.²³

These bills have been opposed many times due to claims that: “equality of male and female gender, infringes on the religious scriptures like the Qur’an.” Some members of the Senate have refused to support the passage of the Bill until the word ‘Equal’ is expunged because they claim that the word is antithetical to their beliefs and sociocultural practices.²⁴

According to Agbalajobi, factors responsible for poor representations of women in leadership positions are believed to be numerous, and some are due to the systems and structures of the political parties. For instance, the financial cost of political party tickets is a challenge. Women most times do not have enough money to pay for the *mandatory expression of interests* and *nomination forms* required by political parties to run for political positions on their platforms. Due to uncompensated labour burdens, unequal inheritance rights and outright discrimination, women are less likely to afford to go through the process of acquiring leadership positions.²⁵ Furthermore, cultural or religious norms like marriage and indigene-ship and even other structures that describe women as subordinates to men are serious obstacles. Other factors are traceable to gender stereotypes, sexual assault, pay gaps, lack of political will/actions by the government, poor media coverage to female political aspirants, hate speeches and threats as well as gender-related electoral violence.

Efforts Towards Promoting the Growth of Female Participation in Nigeria

First, in the aspect of women empowerment programmes, women are accorded the opportunity to develop their natural talents in order to contribute expressively to societal development and also to help challenge cultural and social norms that have posed a disadvantage to women. A good example is the establishment of the Forum of Nigerian Women in Politics (FONWIP) whose major objective is to promote women's empowerment, eradicate all forms of violence and discrimination against women and also support their decision-making in the private and public sectors.²⁶ In addition to organizing seminars on empowerment and inequality, they have also conducted a series of workshops for women aspiring for political offices. They have been responsible for the request that the government should accept the 30% female representation in government appointments.

Secondly, the United Nations and other International Organizations have made tremendous efforts in ending gender inequality in Nigeria by fostering a series of Declarations and Conventions that will put an end to all forms of political discrimination against women. Among such Documents are; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1966, the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPA) in 1995.²⁷ Despite persisting issues in women's participation and development, their access to decision-making and their full participation in public affairs is now recognized as an essential condition for democracy but this has not been actualized.

Thirdly, on the aspects of Quotas and Proportional Representation, are positively-regarded actions of laws that earmark quotas for women to assist in the promotion of gender balance in political affairs. As a result of the Beijing Conference, it was agreed upon in the conference by Nigeria and other signatories that 30% of public seats and positions should be reserved for women. As a result, since the fourth republic, Nigeria has witnessed an increase in the number of women participating in political activities and a few more of them are emerging as chair ladies in their local government councils and also as senators in their respective constituencies. Efforts, undoubtedly, have been made to help improve the representation of Nigerian women in elective offices. One of them is the Special Seats Bill, being one of the Gender Bills seeking to increase women's participation in legislative houses. It is one of the designed gender quotes recognized globally as a positive measure to enable the increase in growth in the political representation of women.²⁸ Currently, over 118 countries and territories adopted this form of gender quota either in their constitution or electoral law to increase the representation of women. Unfortunately, with over two (2) decades of democracy, Nigeria is yet to adopt any form of gender quota despite the conspicuous decline in women's representation.

In the area of enlightenment programmes, political aspirants were paired with established female politicians who played mentoring roles and provided capacity-

building training to aspiring female politicians. Coalitions of NGOs and other women's organizations were formed and awareness programmes were conducted towards educating women on their political and legal rights and providing an enabling environment that allows them to engage in the decision-making process effectively without any form of harassment and violence. Generally, enlightenment programmes were organized to simply raise awareness on critical gender and development issues, improve networking among women, and engage them systematically by advocating for poverty reduction, conflict management, governance and technology.

Women Empowerment Activities in Nigeria by Female Senators and its Impact

Today, there are still few women in political and leadership spaces in Nigeria as only seven (7) out of 109 senators and 22 of the 360 House of Representatives members currently are women. Despite the challenges hindering the progress of female participation in politics, with the few percentages of women occupying the helm of affairs either by election or appointment, they are said to have recorded some appreciable levels of reforms and achievements appreciated by many Nigerians within and outside their senatorial zones and outside the states and the country. The proceeding segment shall discuss the role played by female senators selected for this study in women empowerment in Nigeria.

Stella Oduah: She was an elected senator representing Anambra North Senatorial District of Anambra State and had over the years become a key figure and a vanguard of women empowerment in Nigeria. The former minister of aviation has undoubtedly become a prominent voice for Nigerian women by championing their advancement not just across her senatorial district, but across the federation at large. One of her major records has been the championing of legislative frameworks that would enable women to participate in political affairs and engage in empowerment programmes. As the Chairlady of the Senate Committee on Cooperation and Integration, for example, she introduced the Bill for 35% affirmative action for women as ministers including 20% for women as commissioners in states. Despite the Bill being rejected repeatedly, she has always been at the forefront in re-introducing the Bill with the optimism of its success by ensuring Nigerians that it will be passed into law immediately. She was of the opinion that women cannot wait around for men to give them the opportunity to be partakers of governance in the country, rather every woman should rise up to occasions and opportunities to participate politically and in every sphere of life.

Furthermore, as the president of ECOWAS Female Parliamentarians Association (ECOFEPa), she has always been an object of hope to women both within her senatorial district, Anambra State at large and even at the international level, by encouraging women to engage fully in political participation and never to be discouraged by anybody. She has continued to frown at countries discarding the potentiality of women who make up about half of the world population. She has further asserted that women constitute a large population in the sub-region and therefore they cannot be left behind in developmental movements. In the advancement of women's campaigns, she has successfully empowered over 200 women within her constituency.²⁹

Even in the area of agriculture, she had empowered over a thousand women in many fields of agriculture of which consequently has allowed women in her constituency to earn a living on their own. This, she said is very vital for the building of both family and the nation. Having recognized the high rate of unemployment as a longstanding challenge in the country and lack of effective efforts to tackle it, she has made a lot of efforts for Nigerian women in providing access to knowledge and skills in getting them equipped with needed resources so as to make them to be self-reliant instead of depending on the government all the time. For example, she has routinely trained women and a few men within her constituency on diverse entrepreneurial skills and also empowered them with cash to start up a business. On the 20th of April 2018, women were empowered with active skills and were given cash of Four Million Naira (#4,000,000) in support of all their business endeavors.³⁰ As a result of these empowerment programmes, it has shown a positive impact on the local economy, reducing poverty and joblessness to a high extent.

Moreover, Senator Stella Oduah's idea of women empowerment is providing financial resources to mothers, sisters and daughters in order to support themselves, their homes and their children as well as to be a voice in their communities. She has done undoubtedly well to provide cash and every support necessary to thrive in their businesses, professions as well as academic pursuit. She has also sponsored motions demanding the urgent need to execute the huge provision of boreholes in rural areas in Anambra State. This was to address the shortage of drinking water in order to help the people in rural communities to rely completely on healthy sources of water supply for daily living and for agricultural activities.

Furthermore, Senator Oduah in 2021 unveiled her empowerment scheme called EGO MBIDO AFIA, which means "start-up funds" for rural women. It is a proposed scheme to target 2 million poor Nigerian women in order to assist them with funds for starting up petty trading like selling of Akara (bean cake), vegetables, dried fish, fresh meats, mobile food vending, etc.³¹ The major aim of this empowerment scheme was to pull the poorest among women away from the poverty line and provide extra funds to take care of themselves and their families. This was made successful through engaging strategic stakeholders, and partnerships with churches and community/women leaders to bring the empowerment scheme to realization.

In addition, she also empowered several youths mostly women within her constituency with three hundred thousand (#300,000) each to start businesses. This was made under her empowerment platform known as the 'Young Entrepreneur Encouragement Scheme'. Before the disbursement was made, several processes were carried out, beginning from calling for submissions of feasible business plans, into screening of these applications by university professors and final selections of the best proposals for the award of the funds. Due to the crisis of unemployment in the country, Senator Oduah opined that this was a better way to reduce the burden by creating more jobs rather than increasing the number of job seekers. Also, it was made to create more entrepreneurs and new sources of wealth which will bring economic opulence to the people.³²

In 2014, through another empowerment programme organized by the Princess Stella Oduah Foundation, about 2,000 widows from the Anambra North Senatorial Zone were empowered with cash gifts to support them and their children left behind by their deceased husbands. They were grouped according to their age bracket of which some were 30-40 years, 41-50 years, 51-60 years and 61-70 years and above. This was according to the documentation and arrangement by the empowerment programme.

Finally, she initiated another empowerment programme called the Lifeline Training Programme which started with the training of 4,000 women across the local government areas of Anambra North, Onitsha North and South, Oyi, Ayamelum, Ogbaru and Anambra East/West. The skills they were trained with included; cosmetology, confectionaries, make-up arts, wig-making etc. The second phase of the empowerment programme took place on the 12th of January with another batch of 4,000 women around the age of 18-35 with more skillsets added to the scheme thereby making it an extra-large package.³³ The programme was recorded to be successful as an army of skilled and self-reliant women and entrepreneurial giants increased across the district and across the state. Many of the beneficiaries became independent by moving further to launch their own businesses.³⁴

Oluremi Tinubu: She represents Lagos Central Senatorial District on the platform of the All Progressive Congress (APC) and is also the Chairperson of the Senate Committee on Women's Affairs. She is an administrator, an educationist, and a philanthropist. She was the first lady of Lagos State from 1999 to 2007 when her husband (Bola Ahmed Tinubu) was the governor of Lagos State. She is said to have empowered a lot of women and including the youths in her constituency. She has made a lot of gestures through initiatives like the Post-Secondary School Scholarship Scheme (PSSS) and Petty Traders Empowerment Capital Scheme (PETECS). The PETECS was made to provide supplementary capital to some petty traders in order to improve their standard of living. For example, through PETECS, she empowered over fifty (50) beneficiaries in 2012 from each of the 13 LGAs with the sum of #20,000 to capitalize on existing petty trades.³⁵ Members of her constituency have testified that she has been consistent in interacting with them on a regular basis to make sure that their needs are been solicited and supported at the appropriate time.³⁶

On an international level, she has been advocating for an increase of opportunities for rural women and calling on stakeholders to concentrate on efforts on addressing challenges faced by women in rural areas. She has always been active in commemorating the United Nations International Day of the Rural Women held annually through which she called for programmes targeting rural women in order to help increase their earnings and enable them to attain a better quality of life e.g.³⁷ agriculture, aquaculture, education and so on. One of her major efforts was when she founded the New Era Foundation, a non-profit organization, dedicated to women empowerment, girl-child education, and youth development as well as inspiring young persons to excellence. Over the years, after her tenure, she had made a remarkable impact in the lives of people not only within her

constituency alone but across Lagos State. Some of them include Annual Spelling Bee Competition, Alternative High School for Girls, and endowment funds. As a senator, she hosts Town Hall meetings quarterly with her constituents to render accounts of her stewardship and also get feedback concerning their development needs. In addition to her scorecard, she has sponsored three (3) Bills; to provide Social Security for Elderly Citizens; seek the Amendment of the Labour Act to increase employment opportunities for women, and a Bill to provide Special Economic Assistance to Lagos State in view of its status as a former capital city and the commercial capital of Nigeria.³⁸

In addition, she has masterminded development initiatives for her constituents which are;

- The Post-Secondary School Scholarship Scheme (PSSS), which disburses #100,000 annually to 26 beneficiaries for 4 years or book bursaries of #10,000 for 624 students of tertiary institutions.
- Provision of grants to help exactly 650 beneficiaries within her constituency to re-capitalize their businesses
- Elderly Citizens Assistance Scheme, made to provide maintenance grants to lessen the plight of the elderly. She has so far celebrated over 7,800 beneficiaries so far on this category.
- Sponsoring of Youth Empowerment and Skills Acquisition Scheme (YESAS) to enable more youths within her constituency to become economically productive and self-employed.
- Securing of #377,000,000 from the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) for three institutions
- Obtaining Federal Support through the Senate Committee, for the rehabilitation of Jibowu Junior High School (worth #21million), Banjo Primary School (worth #20 million), and Holy Trinity Primary School Ire-Akari Primary School, and two (2) other primary schools (all worth #15 million).³⁹

She has also organized mentorship programmes for girls within the ages of 12 to 18, to instill values, morals and social graces. She was an organizer of Daughters of Zelophehad Ministry with the aim to minister to the 'next generation' of women in order to prepare them for leadership roles and raising godly families. In the year 2000, Senator Oluremi Tinubu revitalized the Committee of Wives of Lagos State Officials (COWLSO), after many years of inactivity. During her tenure as the Chairperson of that gender-based organization, she mobilized wives of government officials of Lagos State to complement government's efforts in the provision of essential infrastructure for residents. She recorded massive achievements in the construction of recreation centres and gardens across the state to promote the culture of good family life. The Committee under watch showed concern about the general well-being of mothers and children in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A good number of projects have been initiated and commissioned, some of them include the upgrading of the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of the Lagos Island Maternity Hospital and the Neo-natal hearing screening equipment.⁴⁰

Her achievements in the past decade have revealed her faithfulness to her promises. Her consistent return three (3) consecutive times shows that there is strong trust in her abilities and manifesto, and it shows that there are many things working out well leading to a massive acceptance of her. In March 2016, she opened the Abimbola Jakande Obstetrics and Gynecology Centre, at Badore Primary Health Centre for public use in order to cater for the health of society especially, women. She made a lot of ambitious achievements like the distribution of grinding machines to the beneficiaries such as petty traders as part of an empowerment capital scheme. An additional 1172 beneficiaries have benefitted from her empowerment schemes and each of them received business start-up kits together with cash of #40,000.⁴¹

In 2016, she empowered an additional 100 widows in Lagos Island Local Government through the platform of the Widows Economic Empowerment Scheme. #35,000 was given to each widow to either inject it to their businesses or to start up any business of their choice.⁴² It was testified that the programme has been going on for few years and many are said to have been benefitting positively from it and it has helped to meet a lot of needs of vulnerable children.⁴³ Finally, in a series of Town Hall meetings, she showed her displeasure at the low number of women in elective positions for their smugness with political appointments. She further challenged the female constituents to change the status quo by supporting their fellow women whenever they indicate interest in electoral positions. She discouraged the act of women begging for or being satisfied with political appointments but rather charged them to use their voting population power to make headway in the political affairs of Nigeria.⁴⁴

Senator Monsurat Sunmonu: She was the former Oyo State House of Assembly Speaker and currently representing Oyo Central Senatorial District from 2015 to 2019. She was also the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs. She was known for setting up of the Monsurat Olajumoke Sunmonu World Empowerment Foundation (MOSWEF)⁴⁵ and through that platform, a few numbers of empowerment programmes were achieved especially in the health sector. In response to the health situations across her constituency, and in order to upgrade the facilities in the sector, Senator Sunmonu donated solar-powered systems to forty-five (45) primary health centres.⁴⁶ This was made possible through her foundation in conjunction with LUMOS Nigeria in order to support the signs of progress of the state governor in the sector. About thirty-three (33) local government areas benefitted from this scheme in order to improve and ease a series of difficulties in the never-ending electric power outage across basic health care deliveries faced by patients, especially pregnant women and nursing mothers. This, in addition, was made to power a lot of basic appliances like fans, television sets, radios, vaccine fridges, and desktops/laptop computer systems so as to make service delivery free of hitches.⁴⁷

With respect to her mission to fight poverty in the country, she donated several items worth millions of naira to empower the women within her constituency, so as to enable them to be independent and self-reliant. The empowerment items include hair dryers, sewing machines, hand sprayers, generator sets, gas cookers as well as fertilizers. She has also given revolving loans to market women and empowered people living with

disabilities also. All these were made possible through maintaining regular interactions with her constituency members through Town Hall meetings as part of her administrative strategies.

Senator Fatimat Raji-Rasaki: She is representing Ekiti Central Senatorial district of Ekiti State, and the daughter of the late Patriarch of the Obayemi Dynasty (Chief Michael Afolabi Obayemi). She had once served as member of the State House of Assembly in Ekiti State from 2007 to 2011. She has also done a lot for her constituency and beyond in the area of empowerment which was a big plus to her scorecard. Hundreds of women in her district have over the years had causes to smile when she donated economic empowerment materials or resources worth #100,000,000 to them in order to promote self-reliance for her people.⁴⁸ She was known to have made gestures like this when she was member of the Ekiti State House of Assembly and she was determined to do even more now that she is representing a larger political space in the area of poverty reduction and economic development from the grassroots level. Many of these beneficiaries were from the fifty-seven (57) wards after being nominated by various associates and interest groups. Beneficiaries from Ado, Ekiti West, Irepedun/Ifelodun, Efon and Ijero Local Government Areas that make up the Senatorial District received reflexive jackets, spraying machines, insecticides, agro-chemicals, helmets just to name a few, including Ten Million Naira (#10,000,000) cash from Senator Raji-Rasaki.⁴⁹

Other additional materials were rain boots, sewing machines, grinding machines, hair dryers, and cooking stoves that were distributed in five (5) council areas of the district. Another #10,000,000 cash was disbursed to local traders, aged persons, widows and even senior citizens in order to give them solace against the severe economic situation. She has influenced a lot of Bills being passed into law which include; Companies Allied Matters, Nigeria Industrial Development and Zones Commission Bill. In addition to her empowerment reforms, she influenced the bringing of the Bank of Industry (BOI) into her constituency for empowering 2,500 local investors in order to assist them with loans for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

In addition, she has donated over eighty (80) units of motorized boreholes to communities within her constituency. She further organized entrepreneurship and leadership training in photography, multimedia and ICT skillsets. After then, empowerment materials like cameras, laptop computers, printers and ICT repair tool kits to assist them to practice the skill they acquired.⁵⁰ In addition to boreholes donation, over ten (10) farmer markets were renovated in different areas. Even Women Development Centre was renovated as part of her empowerment programme.

Rose Oko: She was a former member of the Federal House of Representatives under the platform of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) representing the Yala/Ogoja Constituency. She is a senator, currently representing Cross River North Senatorial District. She also did a good number of empowerment schemes for women during her tenure. Part of the program was the distribution of fifty (50) grinding machines, 50 cassava processing machines, twenty-five (25) grinding machines for soup ingredients

and including #100,000 cash for thirty (30) persons handed down to the beneficiaries. This earned her so many eulogies as members of the Yala kingdom confessed that this kind of empowerment has never been witnessed before in the history of leadership in that area.⁵¹

She also empowered women within her senatorial zones with agro-business machines that boosted their productivity and profitability. Part of these machines included three (3) rice mill threshers, and groundnut shellers constructed to put a stop to a large number of Bekwara women breaking groundnuts with their bare hands. She also opened a groundnut oil mill to enhance their production of groundnut oil for the Obudu women living in that area. An addition of forty-seven (47) grinding machines and eight hundred (800) bags of fertilizers were given to the female farmers. Additional cash was made available to 122 young people including women whom they were not able to reach out to initially.⁵²

Conclusion

Generally, studies have shown that countries with increased women leadership achieve better economic growth, development and peace as it has been proven statistically that out of 10 most developed countries in 2020, eight of these countries have at least 30% women representation in their legislative house while the other two are with 20+ per cent.⁵³ This implies that the empowerment and political participation of women is inextricable from national development. Nigeria still remains a case study in assessing how the failure and lack of adequate political will to close the gender gap. This has kept women and the country behind while other nations have progressed beyond this developmental challenge. It is therefore recommended that training women on the fundamentals of politics and civic responsibility is necessary given that the absence of such knowledge is one of the challenges women face when they show interest in political participation. Secondly, quality mentoring should be encouraged among aspiring female politicians. Affirmative action as practised among developed countries should be implemented on a large scale by developing nations, having understood the socio-economic advantage when women are involved in political participation.

The fourth is financial support. This is a major challenge faced by women over the years, it has been a discouraging factor in promoting the active political participation of women. Lastly, there should be a change of attitude by the media towards the coverage of women. This can be achieved when media organizations drop their gender sentiments in order to pay attention to the capabilities and advantages of women's political participation in society. With the persistent widening of the gender gap, it has been estimated by the World Economic Forum in 2021 that it will take 'an average of 135.6 years to close the gender gap globally'. This implies that the majority of us living today may not be alive by then to witness this. However, this implies that the actions we take today can contribute to building a better world for women and girls in spite of the present religious and socio-cultural trends.

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