

## The Federal Character Principle and Gender Representation in Nigeria

A. Sat Obiyan and S.T. Akindele

*Department of Political Science, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria*

**KEY WORDS** Federal character; gender representation; quota system; affirmative action; ethnicity; defined territorial zones.

**ABSTRACT** In this paper we examined the utility of the federal character principle as a vehicle for promoting gender representation and equity in Nigeria. We contended that the principle holds great promise in this direction in that, it will help to mitigate the unfair representation of women in the political process; a situation which was engendered by long period of discriminatory practices against women. We further argued that, in spite of the useful potentials of the principle, the effective and rapid promotion of gender equity demands a multi-faceted approach in its implementation as it affects the women in Nigeria. To this end, we suggested additional ways of facilitating the achievement of this objective.

### INTRODUCTION

The intellectual discourse and research in gender studies, particularly in respect of participation in governance, is engendered mainly by the gross under representation and sometimes lack of representation of women in public affairs and institutions. Gender discrimination has thus provoked studies aimed at reversing such discrimination given the immense role that can be played in national development by both components of the gender.

In Nigeria, policies have been enunciated and implemented in a bid to correct certain perceived discrimination. Of all government policies deliberately put in place to address problems of discrimination and unrepresentation, through affirmative action, the federal character principle occupies a pride of place.

Regardless of the nature and extent of defects that may characterise the federal character principle in theory and practice in Nigeria, it has, for quite some time, come to represent an important element in the country's policies and politics. Not unexpectedly, the principle has been subjected to various critical analysis.

The foregoing notwithstanding, not much intellectual resources have been deployed in examining the federal character principle as a vehicle for addressing gender imbalance in the

country. The basic issue to which this article addresses itself is to, in an exploratory manner, examine the federal character principle within the context of gender representation in public institutions and affairs.

We are interested in knowing whether gender representation can be inferred from the letter and/or spirit of the principle. If yes, to what extent, if at all, has it been adhered to? If gender representation is not embedded in the principle, can it be legitimately and fairly used as an instrument to address gender imbalance? If not, what options are available?

To ensure a systematic approach to tackling these issues, they are discussed under several headings. The meaning of and rationale for federal character principle are discussed in the next section. In the subsequent sections we examine female representation in Nigeria, redressing gender imbalance through the federal character principle and lastly conclusion.

### Federal Character Principle: Meaning and Raison D'etre

Despite the initial differing conceptions ascribed to the federal character principle (see Agbaje, 1989) the meaning of the principle can no longer be regarded as vague (Obiyan, 1998). The federal character principle essentially refers to the recognition of the plural nature of the country in recruitment, distribution of administrative and political offices and power as well as the resources of the country.

The essence is to allow the composition and conduct of public institutions and affairs reflect the country's diversity. It is premised on the ground that when national institutions and affairs are reflective, in composition and conduct, of the pluralism of the country then, a sense of belonging is likely to be evoked from the citizenry. It is also designed to mitigate, if not obviate, the bellicose political struggle that characterised previous Nigeria's democratic

systems. These are well laid out in the report of the constitutional conferences from 1977 to date as well as the various Nigerian constitutions promulgated since then (see Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979, 1989, 1999).

A close look at the federal character principle as articulated in the different policy and legal documents reveals that it is not envisaged to have under its ambit the reversion of gender imbalance in public affairs and institutions. This is underscored by the fact that the issue of appropriate unit of representation, for the purpose of pursuing the goals of the principle, has always been on such areas as "state", "ethnicity" and "defined territorial zones". It is further reinforced by the fact that, in its implementation, some of these form the basis of the unit of representation.

Thus, even though the federal character principle is, in part, designed to deal with the problem of imbalance and discrimination, it is not focused on gender imbalance. The question then arises as to whether the principle can be rightly used to address the problem of gender discrimination in the composition and conduct of public institutions and affairs. We shall soon examine this. But we consider it appropriate to first discuss female representation in Nigeria.

### **Female Representation in Nigeria**

Global history has proved that both males and females are capable of immense contribution to human development. Such contribution can be at any level or position of authority. The era of Lady Margaret Thatcher as prime minister of Britain remain an important segment of British political history. In the Philippines, India and Pakistan, women have served their countries at the highest level of political authority. These are Mrs Corason Aquino, Mrs Indira Gandhi and Ms Benazir Bhutto, respectively. We have also seen Mrs Golda Meir wielding ultimate political authority in Israel.

In every society women exercise some degree of influence or power. However, the extent of that influence or power depends largely on the gender system of culture prevailing in a particular society (Leacock, 1986). While some cultures make no demarcation between a male and a female in terms of who occupies what position, others may deliberately discriminate against females in filling certain positions. A good example is the Islamic states where sharia law operates.

What is today known as Nigeria is a conglomeration of different peoples and cultures. Prior to the infiltration, occupation and domination of the political, economic, and socio-cultural systems of these peoples by the colonialists the former were organised into distinct political entities.

In those different communities, women were not regarded the same way. In other words, there was no uniform treatment of women in terms of recognition. In some of these cultures, women, just like their men counterpart, could rise to almost any position of authority or leadership. For example studies on Yoruba culture and history (Afonja, 1986) have shown that the extent of women participation in governance in some Yoruba kingdom knew no bound as some women wielded the highest political authority.

From 1393 to 1419 AD a woman known as *Eye Aro* was the ruler in Akure while between 1511 and 1552 AD *Yeyenirewu*, also a woman, was the ruler in Ado Ekiti (Afonja, 1986). Up to now women are still appointed regents in some Yoruba communities. Though women exerted authority at several levels of authority, this is not to say that there was complete gender equity among the Yoruba (see Afonja, 1975). There is no known recent period when a woman ascended the throne of Oba in Yoruba land.

Prior to the colonial era, some other communities in Nigeria also recognised leadership qualities in women. Not only that, their socio-political and cultural ambience was structured in a way that did not frown at, if not deliberately encourage, the emergence of women leaders in governance.

In some other communities the level of women participation in public affairs was, at best, quite dissatisfying. The Emirate system in northern Nigeria did not, and still does not, encourage the participation of women in governance. Indeed, it discourages women participation in governance. This, in the main, explains why women in that part of the country lag behind their southern counterparts in the efforts to elevate the socio-cultural and political status of women.

A factor that has worked against female political upliftment in that part of the country is their perception of Islamic tenets and practices which encourage the subservience of women to their male counterparts. In the traditional Igbo society too, men were elevated above women. All traditional

groups and/or councils were either completely dominated or monopolised by men. In some part of Nigeria, the guiding philosophy regarding women's involvement in public life, in the traditional political systems, appeared to be "women are to be seen and not heard".

What can be discerned from the foregoing is that traditional political systems in Nigeria did not provide for gender equity. This disadvantaged antecedent of Nigerian women inevitably affected their position in post colonial Nigeria. This was aggravated by certain discriminatory practices relating to educational advancement. In many cases male children were known to have been encouraged to acquire modern (western) education in contra distinction to women. Where there was a choice to be made owing to financial constraint, male children were generally preferred to go to, or remain in, school over and above female children even when the latter are known to be more intellectually endowed.

A close study of positions in Nigeria - both elective and appointive - shows gross gender inequity to the disadvantage of women (Table I). Male complete dominance characterised Nigeria's first republic.

**Table 1: FEMALE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN NIGERIA**

<i>Period</i>	<i>Senate</i>	<i>House of representatives</i>	<i>Federal cabinet</i>
First Republic	1	Nil	Nil
Second Republic	1	3	3
(The botched)	1	Nil	See comments
Third Republic			on military regimes
Fourth Republic	3	13 (one nullified)	7

*Source:* Collated from different documents by the author(s).

In the first republic there were thirty-six senators and three hundred and twelve members of the House of Representatives. Of these, only one woman (Mrs Wuraola Esan) was in Senate while there was none in the House of Representatives. Similarly, there was no female member of federal cabinet. These represent 2.78 percent, zero percent and zero percent of female representation in the senate, House of representatives and federal cabinet respectively.

In the second republic, women had an improved, but still insignificant, representation in the cabinet and parliament. There were three female members of the House of Representatives.

Ms. Franca Afegbua who was the only female member of Senate in the second republic was elected in the 1983 general elections. This implies that for the first four years of civilian rule in the second republic, there was male monopoly of the senate. From October 1979 to September 1983 the federal cabinet was composed of three female members out of a total of forty-one. In percentage terms, female representation at the federal cabinet in the period under reference was 7.32 percent. Though a relative improvement, it still typifies female under-representation in the country. However, from October 1983 until the demise of that republic no female was represented in a thirty-five-member-cabinet.

In comparison to the second republic, the ill-fated third republic did not represent an improvement with respect to gender balance in the political process at the federal level. In the National Assembly there was just one female member, Mrs. Kofoworola Akerele-Bucknor who was a Senator. Thus, in the ninety-one member senate, only one woman - representing 1.1 percent, sat as a member. Twelve women sat as members of the House of Representatives during the period.

Gender equity has not been substantially promoted in the current democratic system in spite of the marginal increase of women in political representation. At present, the senate comprising one hundred and nine members, has just three female members representing 2.75 percent. These are Mrs Florence Ita-Giwa, Hajija Khairat Abdul Razaq-Gwadabe and Stella Omu. Similarly, female representation in the House of Representatives (initially thirteen in number but reduced to twelve following the nullification of one) is dwarfed by the overwhelming dominance of men. Furthermore, in a cabinet of forty-nine only about seven members are women. While this may appear to be an improvement on the past it still considerably reflects gender inequity.

The composition of state cabinets and Houses of Assemblies further betrays gender inequity. The thirty-six governors are men while insignificant number of women holds the position of deputy governors. The state Assemblies are overwhelmingly dominated by men. In addition only few women are serving as state commissioners. This necessitated the call by women and women groups for increased representation of women in cabinet (see Newspapers of the time).

**Table 2: Female representation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: August, 1998 - February 1999 Elections**

Type	Seats	No. of female contestants	No. of female winners	Percentage
L.G.A. Chairmanship	774	46	9	1.16
Councillorship	8810	510	143	1.62
State Assembly	990	39	12	1.21
Governor	72	6	1 (Deputy Governor)	1.39
Senate	109	5	3	2.75
House of Representatives	360	29	13 (one nullified)	3.61

Source: Adapted from Agina-Ude, Ada (1999) *New Challenges and Directions: Nigerian Women in Democracy*, A GADA Report for Inter-Agency Forum of Donors Interface, GADA, Lagos. P. 13.

Military regimes did not fare better than their civilian counterparts in female representation in cabinets. Indeed, evidence supports the position that military regimes relegated women to the background in the composition of their cabinets.

Women representation at all levels of governance in Nigeria is highly disproportional to their composition of the total population. To further reinforce this point, it is important to point out that only two hundred and six women won seats out of One Thousand, Two Hundred and Ninety-seven local positions nationwide in the 1990 elections (See Agina-Ude, 1990, 13). This represented a mere fifteen percent of the total seats.

In the annals of Nigeria's political history, no political party has presented a female presidential candidate. We have also not witnessed a female being presented as a gubernatorial candidate in any state of the federation. Yet, women are said to form the grater part of Nigeria's registered voters. Of the 47 million registered voters in Nigeria women comprise 27 million (see Agina-Ude, 1999, 14). This means 57.45 percent of Nigeria's registered voters are women. Thus, while in terms of voting strength, women represent the larger segment; they represent relative insignificant position in terms of political representation.

It is important to point out that the drive towards gender equity has gained more momentum and force in the administrative sector. Not only do women now occupy top administrative positions in both public and private sectors, their number has also been bolstered over the years. This suggests some gains in the effort to achieve greater

women participation. The greatest obstacle is in the area of political positions - elective and appointive.

It may be argued that the nature of Nigerian politics, particularly in the past, scares women from active participation in politics. Violence, sometimes extreme violence, has been a noticeable feature of Nigeria politics. It is also argued that politics involves so much money which only very few women (most of whom may be apolitical) can provide. It is, therefore, reasoned that given these facts women representation in the political process is bound to be negligible especially when such positions are regarded as political goods meant for faithful supporters of political parties.

No doubt, these are seemingly plausible and forceful arguments. They are, however, not without limit. While the extent of violence in politics may vary from one political system to another, violence is not a unique feature of Nigerian politics. There have been cases where women emerged as political leaders of politically turbulent and violence-ridden countries. Besides, the argument that "men are by nature more aggressive and more violent than women, and therefore better suited to politics" (see Steinem, 1986) is universal. Yet, in many democracies women are meaningfully represented and play remarkable roles in the political process. And as has been argued, there is nothing inherent, nothing genetically natural about the markedly different attitudes assigned to men and women (Pogrebin, 1986). In the same vein, money as a vital ingredient in politics is not peculiar to Nigeria. Besides, a candidate does not necessarily have to provide all the money he/she needs for elections from his/her purse alone.

Thus, while the aforementioned factors might have inhibited the significant participation of women in politics, they do not provide all the explanatory variables. Our perception of the nature of the role of women in the society is prejudiced against women. Redefining that perception in a manner favourable to active women participation, therefore, is a significant step to addressing the problem of gender imbalance.

In the next section, we address the utility of the federal character principle in solving the problem of gender imbalance.

### **Redressing Gender Imbalance Through The Federal Character Principle**

At the heart of the federal character principle,

as we have pointed out, is the attempt to eschew group imbalance in public institutions and affairs. The definition of that “group” does not include gender both in the conception and implementation of the principle. Understandably, there are legal provisions which tend to guarantee the equality of all individual and groups including women. But there is no legally backed affirmative action to promote gender balance.

Conceptually, the federal character principle can be broadened to include provisions, which encapsulate gender representation. This could be by way of a clause stipulating a minimum cut-off point for women representation in certain political offices. However, some are wont to point to problems that may be associated with this constitutional/legal provisions.

The fact of rigidity of constitutional provisions is not lost on us. To constitutionalize a guaranteed minimum level of participation for women in certain political sphere may make such provision rigid. Rigidity in itself is not necessarily evil. The need for strict adherence to certain provisions may justify the rigidisation of such provisions.

Furthermore, it may also be argued that to set aside a certain minimum participation level for women may imply sacrificing merit for mediocrity. These and some other problems are likely to be thrown up. We need to point out emphatically, that the whole idea for suggesting a legally or constitutionally guaranteed minimum participation level for women in certain political sphere is not to ensure equalization of representation between men and women. Rather, it is meant to encourage the participation of women.

To this end, such a provision could merely provide for women representation in, say, every state cabinet and local government council. In this way, even in states and local governments where cultural beliefs and practices seem to exclude women from gladiatorial participation such provision will ensure the demise of such practices. In addition, it will facilitate the acceptance, by the generality of people, that women can justifiably play leadership role in the society.

This provision can easily be applied to appointive position. In the case of elective positions, however, it may be more cumbersome to apply. For instance, if five percent of the Senate is to be filled by women, it could be clumsy to implement since membership of the body is by election. Even if ten percent of the candidates presented for election by each

political party are women, the outcome may not necessarily lead to the emergence of up to five percent female members.

Thus, while for appointive political offices, it may be convenient to articulate and implement a specified minimum female representation; difficulties are likely to beset the application of same to elective offices. To overcome these difficulties, it will suffice, in our view, to restrict such provision (in the case of elective positions) to a specified minimum of female candidates to be presented for parliamentary elections by each political party. This will ensure that while no number of legislative seats is reserved for women, they will always have the chance of securing a certain minimum number.

This provision can also be made transitional in which case it will operate for a specified period of time. These strategies will promote gender equity by encouraging female participation and enhancing societal acceptability of female leadership role.

We need to state that while the suggestion for the broadening of the federal character principle to promote gender equity remains a valid and feasible option, promoting gender equity in a rapid and effective manner demands a multi-dimensional approach. In addition to the federal character principle approach, (greater) emphasis should be laid on discouraging, by a combination of legislation and education, those beliefs and practices that are discriminatory against women. The ultimate implication of these is that they will contribute to the minimisation of the unfair sexual distribution of political power skewed against women.

## CONCLUSION

The pre-colonial Nigerian communities were devoid of gender equity. The degree of gender inequity, however, differed from one community to another. The discriminatory gender practices have had considerable impact on gender balance in the political sphere tilting the pendulum in outrageous disfavour to women.

Against the background of this, we examined the utility of the federal character principle in promoting gender equity in Nigeria. It is our contention that the principle can be helpful in this direction. Nevertheless, we observed some caveats and proffered solutions to them. Finally, we have also argued that for an effective and quick move

towards gender equity a multi-pronged approach requiring a combination of factors need to be adopted. To this end, emphasis should be laid on, *inter alia*, creating in people's mind a favourable attitude to female leadership and discouraging practices that are gender bias against women, particularly those that are antithetical to women participation in public affairs and political process.

We need to add that reducing the gender gap requires concerted and sustained effort. Considerable success in a twinkle of an eye is impossible.

### REFERENCES

- Afonja, Simi. 1975. "Nigerian Women in Traditional Public Affairs" in *La Civilization de la Femme dans La Tradition Africaine*, Presence Africaine.
- . 1986. "Women, Power and Authority in Traditional Yoruba Society" in L. Dube et. al. (eds) *Visibility and Power: Essays on Women in Society and Development* pp 136-157.
- Agbaje, Adigun 1989. "Media and the Shaping of Federal Character: A Content Analysis of Four Decades of Nigerian Newspapers (1950-1984)" in Ekeh et al. *Federal Character and Federalism in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Heinemann.
- Agina-Ude Ada. 1999. "New Challenges and Directions: Nigerian Women in Democracy" *A GADA Report for Inter-Agency Forum of Donors Interface*, Lagos. GADA.
- Leacock, E. 1986. "Women, Power and Authority" in Dube, Leela et al. (eds) *Visibility and Power: Essays on Women in Society and Development* pp 107-135
- Obiyan, A.S. 1998. *The Federal Character Principle an Instrument of National Integration in Nigeria* M.Sc Thesis. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University.
- Pogrebin, L.C. 1986. "Sexism in American Culture" in J.D. Barber and B. Kellerman (eds) *Women Leaders in American Politics*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall. pp174-189
- Steinem, Gloria. 1986. "Moving Beyond Sexism" in J.D. Barbey and B. Kellerman (eds) *Women Leaders in American Politics*. pp394-398
- The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. 1979.
- The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. 1989.