

Gender and Participatory Democracy in the Local Government System in Nigeria: A Case Study of Ebonyi State, (2001-2011)

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Abstract

Democracy dynamics and gender issues have continued to receive global attention. Thus, this paper examines how gender concerns have been accommodated in the Local Government System in Nigeria, by conducting a case study of Ebonyi State; from 2001 to 2011. Ebonyi State is one of the component states of Nigeria's federal democracy. The specific objectives of the study were to: (i) examine how gender issues have been treated in the local government system of Ebonyi State, from 2001 to 2011 (ii) determine the extent to which participatory democracy in the local government system of Ebonyi State was gender tolerant between 2001 and 2011 and (iii) recommend ways of increasing gender tolerance, in the local government system of the State. The methodology for the study was empirical analysis. The theory of participatory democracy was adopted as theoretical framework for the study. Findings of the study indicate that gender tolerance was treated with levity and was almost non-existent in the local government system of Ebonyi State; from 2001 to 2011. This situation has negative implications for participatory democracy in the state. Result of the analysis of how chairmanship positions were held in the local government system of the state, from 2001 to 2011 is worrisome. At each point in time, from 2001 to 2011 in the 13 Local Government Areas of Ebonyi State, the female gender made only 8% participation in decision-making, at the chairmanship level. In view of the findings of the study therefore, the recommendations made include; government's sensitization programmes that would extend to the traditional institutions and faith based organizations; and also government's encouragement of gender tolerance during Local Government Elections. Government should give such encouragement by extending token financial support to successful candidates for the elections; especially at the chairmanship level, irrespective of party affiliation. It is concluded in the paper that purposeful democracy implies participatory democracy, which in turn implies gender tolerance, which must be rooted in the local government system.

Keywords: Gender, Participatory Democracy, Local Government System.

Introduction

Democracy dynamics and gender issues, particularly gender inequality, have continued to receive global attention. Indeed, Ezeani (1998:96) remarks that gender inequality in the

political system has been a notable feature of all nations of the world. Hence, the participatory necessity of democracy, also introduces the necessity for gender balance. It also requires that in democratic states, the grassroots should be the bedrock of democratic governance. The concept of grassroots in democratic governance, in fact highlights the role of the Local Government, in a participatory democratic process (Abada, 2012:176). Onah (1999:50) further posits that grassroots-mobilization is the key to the enhancement of the participation of Nigerian women in politics. The foregoing issues have generically created gender concerns in participatory democracy in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

After a long period of Military Rule in Nigeria, the country in 1999, returned to the path of what now appears to be sustainable democracy. The period of military rule, occasioning a civil war (1967-1970), critically hampered the democratic process in Nigeria, between 1966 and 1999. There was a major attempt to restore civilian democracy (1979-1983) but this was only an attempt; as the Military came back. Nigeria, a former British colony, obtained independence from Britain in 1960. The first democratic dispensation thus, lasted from 1960 to 1966 (a period of six years). The next democratic dispensation, covered the period of 1979-1983 (a period of four years). Every other era in the life of independent Nigeria, was either marked by full-blown military dictatorship or some form of amalgam between the military and civilian politicians. The psychology of the military essentially entailed the destruction of democratic structures. Olusegun Obasanjo, who became Nigeria's President in 1999 (he was also Military Head of State, from 1976 to 1979), was in office for two terms of four years each. He handed over to Umaru Musa Yar'dua, whose demise in office in 2010 led to the emergence of Yar'dua's Vice President, Goodluck Jonathan, as Acting President. Jonathan was subsequently confirmed substantive President and later elected in his own capacity as President on 18 April, 2011.

From the Obasanjo Presidency, through the Yar'dua Presidency, to the incumbent Jonathan Administration in Nigeria, it is generally upheld that in elective and appointive positions, there has been an increasing accommodation of gender concerns. In fact, Obi (2007:236) opines that the Obasanjo Administration did a marvelous job in the area of women empowerment. Subsequently, according to Iheuwa (2013:1) the Administration of President Jonathan has made significant impact in the area of women empowerment, in view of the fact that in all the 100 years of Nigeria's corporate existence, the country has never witnessed the monumental visibility and inclusion of women in governance and decision-making, as it has experienced under the Jonathan Administration. Iheuwa (2013:1) further posits that in the spirit of its expressed policy, in support of 30% Affirmative Action for the benefit of women, the Federal Government under President Jonathan, made conscious and positive efforts to take appropriate measures, to reflect a good percentage of women in governance. For instance, the administration took off in 2011 with the appointment of 13 female Cabinet Ministers, 5 female Special Advisers, 10 female Ambassadors, 16 female Judges of the Court of Appeal; 11 female Permanent Secretaries, 16 female Judges of the Federal High Court, 3 female Judges of the Supreme Court, 6 female Judges of the National Industrial Court; a female Acting President, Court of Appeal and The Chief Justice of the Federation as female. By this, the President has

made good his campaign promises by raising the number of women in decision-making positions to an unprecedented level (Iheuwa 2013:1).

However, the Federal Republic of Nigeria is basically a federation of 36 states. The component states and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja, account for 774 Local Government Areas that are part of the general architecture of democratic governance in Nigeria. Beyond the accommodation of gender concerns at the central level of government, how have gender issues been treated at the lower tiers of government? Is gender tolerance in Nigeria, rooted in grassroots democracy or hoisted on the democratic environment from the center? If gender sensitivity and accommodation are not routed through the local government system, to the central level of governance, how was the gender tolerance at the central level achieved? The foregoing are the major questions that will further guide the conduct of this study. Ebonyi State is one of the component states of the Nigerian federal democracy. Thus, the specific objectives of the study are to: (i) examine how gender issues have been treated in the local government system of Ebonyi State, from 2001 to 2011 (ii) determine the extent to which participatory democracy in the local government system of Ebonyi State was gender tolerant between 2001 and 2011 and (iii) recommend ways of increasing gender tolerance in the local government system of the State. The methodology for the study is empirical analysis. The theoretical framework of the study is the theory of participatory democracy.

Conceptual Clarification

Participatory Democracy

Defining what democracy means nowadays has become more problematic, as several alternative democratic visions are being developed and contrasted in normative theory and political practice (Cini, 2011:1). The problematic of defining the fundamental concept of democracy, is a pointer to the challenges of presenting an acceptable definition of the democratic vision of participatory democracy. However, citing Citroni (2010, 41); Cini (2011:4) explains that the participatory approach to the conceptualization of democracy, addresses the “quantitative” dimension of mass democracy, as it tends to find out “how many people take part in how many political venues to make how many decisions”. Accordingly, the participatory theory embraces and promotes the political inclusion of all individuals, aiming at the enlargement and radicalization of democratic citizenship (Cini, 2011:4). Democracy therefore presupposes participation as desideratum. Participatory democracy may accordingly, contain tautological nuances, as the very concept of democracy implies participatory hues.

Participatory Democracy as Theoretical Framework

According to Schaap and Edwards (2007:1), the origins of the concept of participatory democracy in democratic theory can be situated in the 1970s, especially in the work of Carol Pateman and C. B. Macpherson, who developed their ideas as a New Left model of democracy, incorporating some elements of the developmental model of republicanism and libertarian Marxist positions. The core principle of participatory democracy is that people have equal right to liberty and self-development, which can only be achieved in a society that fosters a sense of political efficacy, nurtures a concern for collective problems, and contributes to the formation of a knowledgeable citizenry; capable of

taking a sustained interest in the governmental process. The key features of participatory democracy include the direct participation of citizens in the regulation of the key institutions of governance (Schaap and Edwards 2007:1). Marshall (1998:482) had earlier posited that participatory democracy is the twentieth-century reincarnation of the ancient Greek ideal of government by the people; adding that participatory democracy is direct democracy, in the sense that all citizens are actively involved in all important decisions. The theoretical framework of participatory democracy in this study is not in the classical dimension of twentieth-century reincarnation, which may complicate and slow down the decision-making process (Marshall, 1998:483).

What has in fact, given rise to the concept of participatory democracy is the tendency of statesmen to deviate from democratic ideals (Russell, 1977). It is in view of the long period of apparent deviations from the democratic ideals in Nigeria, during the military dispensations, that participatory democracy has continued to be emphasized in political discourses in the country. According to Odoh (2004:184), Nigeria returned to democratic rule in May 1999, after democracy had gone through a tortuous transition. Participatory democracy would prevent tortuous democratic experiences. Hence, in the theoretical context of this paper, democracy is participatory when every critical segment of the society is accommodated in the democratic process. The critical segments of course, include the gender segments.

Gender

According to Ezeani (1998:97), gender refers to a system of roles and relationships between men and women that are determined not by biology fully but by social, cultural, political and economic factors. Thus, gender is constructed, unlike biological sex which is nature's gift. Sex as a biological factor, is similar in all societies and cultures, while gender being a socio-cultural and historical construct, varies from culture to culture and over time (Ezeani, 1998:97). Gender is therefore a system of both social, cultural, political or economic roles and relationships between man and woman, at a given time in a society. However, sooner than later, discourses on gender continue as discussion on gender inequality and women disempowerment; and the need for their empowerment. In discussing participatory democracy, gender tends to sooner than later, translate to advocacy for more female participation and more female representation. In this paper, the gender variable has also been colored by interests in what constitutes the dividends of democracy for the female sex, particularly the female sex at the local government setting.

Local Government System

Local government can be defined as a political authority which is purposely created by law or Constitution for local communities, by which they manage their local public affairs, within the limits of the law/constitution (Ogunna, 1996:1). This definition highlights the communal nuance of local government. Thus, according to Ibiatan (2010:208), local government in the communal sense means people's political instrument to participate in resource allocation, distribution and power acquisition. Therefore, in a federal democracy, local government is also the basis for the articulation of the local community's interests in the areas of resource allocation, distribution and power acquisition. Furthermore, local government serves as a good training ground for national politics, as councilors gradually gain the art and craft of politics (Ogunna, 1996:5). In

Nigeria, each of the 774 Local Governments oversees a Local Government Area. There are 13 of such Local Government Areas in Ebonyi State. The 13 Local Government Areas and their various Local Government Councils, make up the local government system of Ebonyi State.

Ebonyi State

Ebonyi State is a mainland South-Eastern State of Nigeria, inhabited and populated primarily by Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria. The Capital and largest city of Ebonyi State is Abakaliki. Afikpo is the second largest city. Ebonyi State is one of the six states in Nigeria created in 1996 by the Military Government of General Sani Abacha. The state was created from the old Abakaliki Division of Enugu State and old Afikpo Division of Abia State. The state is currently governed by Chief Martin Elechi, who was elected State Governor in 2007. Ebonyi is primarily an agricultural region. It is a leading producer of rice, yams, potatoes, maize, beans, and cassava. Rice and yams are predominantly cultivated in Edda. Ebonyi also has several solid mineral resources, but little large-scale commercial mining. Ebonyi is called "the salt of the nation" for its huge salt deposits at the Okposi and Uburu Salt Lakes. There are nine major first languages (variants of Igbo Language) spoken in Ebonyi State: Afikpo, Mgbo, Izzi, Ezaa, Ikwo, Kukele, Legbo, Mbembe, and Oring. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ebonyi_State).

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Gender Presentation of Councillorship Positions in the Local Government System of Ebonyi State from 2001 to 2011, in Terms of Number of Councilors

Year/Period	2001		2002		2003		2004		2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		2010		2011	
Gender Type	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
ABAKALIKI	14	–	14	–	14	–	14	1	14	1	14	1	12	3	12	3	12	3	13	5	13	5
EBONYI	13	–	13	–	13	–	13	–	13	–	13	–	12	1	12	1	12	1	15	1	15	1
AFIKPO NORTH	12	–	12	–	12	–	12	–	12	–	12	–	12	–	12	–	12	–	14	1	14	1
AFIKPO SOUTH	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	12	–	13	1
EZZA NORTH	11	–	11	–	11	–	10	1	10	1	10	1	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	3	11	3
EZZA SOUTH	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	9	5	9	5
OHAOZARA	10	1	10	1	10	1	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	–	11	3	11	3
OHAUKWU	12	2	12	2	12	2	14	1	14	1	14	1	14	1	14	1	14	1	16	3	16	3
ONICHA	12	–	12	–	12	–	10	1	10	1	10	1	11	–	11	–	11	–	12	3	12	3
IKWO	20	–	20	–	20	–	19	1	19	1	19	1	19	1	19	1	19	1	20	4	20	4
ISHIELU	16	–	16	–	16	–	16	–	16	–	16	–	16	–	16	–	16	–	18	2	18	2
IZZI	14	–	14	–	14	–	14	–	14	–	14	–	14	–	14	–	14	–	15	3	15	3
IYO	10	1	10	1	10	1	10	1	10	1	10	1	10	1	10	1	10	1	12	2	12	2
Total	166	4	166	4	166	4	165	6	165	6	165	6	164	7	164	7	167	7	179	36	179	36

Source: A Compendium of Local Government Activities in Ebonyi State, compiled and edited by Mr.

Godwin Okafor.A. Snaap Press Ltd. (2000) and Records of the office of Ebonyi State

Independent Electoral Commission, Abakaliki. (2004-2011)

Table 2: Gender Presentation of Councillorship Positions in the Local Government System of Ebonyi State from 2001 to 2011, in Percentages

Year/Period	Total No. of Councilors	No. of Male Councilors	% for Male Councilors	No. of Female Councilors	% for Female Councilors
2001	170	166	98	4	2
2002	170	166	98	4	2
2003	170	166	98	4	2
2004	171	165	96	6	4
2005	171	165	96	6	4
2006	171	165	96	6	4
2007	171	164	96	7	4
2008	171	164	96	7	4
2009	174	167	96	7	4
2010	215	179	83	36	17
2011	215	179	83	36	17

Table 2 above, shows that from 2001 to 2003, there were 170 councilors in the Local Government System of Ebonyi State; out of which only four were females, representing also, only 2% of the councillorship population. From 2004 to 2008, there were 171 councilors, out of which from 2004 to 2006, 6 of them were females and between 2007 and 2008, 7 of them were females - the percentage of female to male membership still about 4%. Between 2010 and 2011, the number of male councilors became 179, while the number of female councilors increased significantly to 36 - a percentage range of 17%. Incidentally, the period of 2010 to 2011 fall under the administration of President Jonathan. To some extent therefore, between 2010 and 2011 there is a positive relationship between the degree of gender representation in the Ebonyi State Local Government System and the high degree of gender tolerance(Iheuwa 2013:1), at the central level of government; using the increase in the number of female councilors in the Ebonyi State Local Government System, as assessment criterion.

Table 3

GENDER COMPOSITION OF CHAIRMANSHIP POSITIONS IN EBONYI STATE LOCAL GOVT. SYSTEM, 2001-2011.

	2001		2002		2003		2004		2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		2010		2011		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
ABAKALIKI	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	
EBONYI	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	
AFIKPO NORTH	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	
AFIKPO SOUTH	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	
EZZA NORTH	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_
EZZA SOUTH	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	
OHAOZARA	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	
OHAUKWU	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	
ONICHA	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	
IKWO	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	
ISHIELU	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	
IZZI	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	
IVO	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	1	_	
Total	13	_	13	_	13	_	12	1	12	1	12	1	12	1	12	1	12	1	12	1	12	1	

Source: A Compendium of Local Government Activities in Ebonyi State, compiled and edited by Mr.

Godwin Okafor.A. Snaap Press Ltd. (2000) and Records of the office of Ebonyi State

Independent Electoral Commission, Abakaliki. (2004-2011)

Table 4: Gender Presentation of Chairmanship Positions in the Local Government System Of Ebonyi State, from 2001 to 2011 in Percentages

Year/Period	No of Positions	Male Gender	% for Males	Female Gender	% for Females
2001	13	13	100	0	0
2002	13	13	100	0	0
2003	13	13	100	0	0
2004	13	12	92	1	8
2005	13	12	92	1	8
2006	13	12	92	1	8
2007	13	12	92	1	8
2008	13	12	92	1	8
2009	13	12	92	1	8

2010	13	12	92	1	8
2011	13	12	92	1	8

Table 4 above, shows the gender composition of chairmanship positions, in the Local Government System of Ebonyi State, from 2001 to 2011, presented in percentages. The Ebonyi State Local Government System is made up of 13 Local Government Areas that are run by 13 Local Government Councils. Constitutionally, each of the councils has a Chairman as Chief Executive Officer. Incidentally, from 2001 to 2003, the 13 Local Government Councils were headed by 13 male Local Government Chairmen. From 2004 to 2011, the ratio only changed insignificantly to 12:1. Presented in percentages, this translates to only 8% representation for the female population of Ebonyi State. The single positions were occupied at different times by Chairpersons in Ezza North and Ebonyi Local Government Areas. Thus, between 2004 and 2006, Ezza North LGA had a female Chairperson. But between 2007 and 2011, it was Ebonyi LGA that returned a female LGA Chairman (in Ebonyi State, there is Ebonyi LGA).

The participatory approach to the conceptualization of democracy, we recall, addresses the “quantitative” dimension of mass democracy, as it tends to find out “how many people take part in how many political venues to make how many decisions” (Cini 2011:4). Therefore, at each point in time, from 2001 to 2011 in the 13 Local Government Areas of Ebonyi State, the female gender made only 8% participation in decision-making, at the chairmanship level. This situation indeed, indicates that gender tolerance was almost non-existent in the Local Government System of Ebonyi State, from 2001 to 2011. It further suggests that the increasing wave of gender tolerance at the central level of governance in Nigeria is not rooted in grassroots democracy but merely hoisted on the democratic environment from the center. Furthermore, these findings of the study suggest that the gender activists at the central level of governance in Nigeria might be representing some narrow interests.

Constraints to Gender Accommodation in the Local Government System of Ebonyi State

Obi (2007:226-227), has in general terms, identified and discussed the following, as some of the constraints to women participation, in democratic governance and leadership in Nigeria:

- (i) Interference in women’s political decisions by their husbands: for this, many women cannot make their own political decisions.
- (ii) When Women isolate themselves in Politics and Governance Due to Lack of Interest: It is assumed in this case that women are generally less interested in and less knowledgeable about politics than men. Hence, women isolate themselves and it is termed lack of interest.
- (iii) Segregation of Women from Men to Promote High Morality: in this case, especially in the traditional setting in Nigeria, women are segregated from men in public places like churches, political rallies, schools and political arenas, in the belief that this will prevent promiscuity.
- (iv) Lack of Access to Education: although in recent times, this issue is no longer as pronounced as it was in the past, the men who were previously placed at an

advantaged position over women, are still benefitting from such advantaged positions.

(v) Lack of Access to Family Inheritance: which leads to women's poverty starting from the basic unit of the society - the home; this denies the female child family inheritance, thereby leaving the female children financially incapacitated to participate in politics or lobby for governance and leadership positions like her male sibling.

(vi) Social Deprivation and De-politicization of Women: Nigerian women are usually over burdened with household chores that they have little or no time to go to political rallies and campaigns and this situation has turned many of them into social and political misfits (Obi, 2007:226-227).

In the particular case of the local government system of Ebonyi State, the above constraints are still the applicable constraints to gender accommodation, in participatory democracy. However, as highlighted by Onah (1999:54), the Nigerian Constitution (1999) accords equal rights to every citizen of Nigeria, irrespective of sex. There is accordingly, no institutionalized discrimination against the female sex in politics, education or any other sector of the society. Participatory democracy in the local government system of Ebonyi State therefore has to be gender inclusive.

Recommendations

Gender tolerance and accommodation are indeed, desiderata for societal progress everywhere. In view of the findings of the study, the following recommendations are hereby made, particularly for the Local Government System of Ebonyi State:

Government should embark on spirited sensitization campaigns to mobilize women for political participation. In doing this, Government has to seek the understanding and cooperation of the traditional institution, through the Traditional Rulers. Their understanding and cooperation are needed in order to place less emphasis on certain traditional practices that portray women as less capable than men. For instance, more men are usually conferred with Chieftaincy Titles than women. Thus, if the Traditional Rulers increase the number of women that can receive these traditional titles, it will also increase the rating of women in political participation and enhance the quality of participatory democracy in the Local Government Areas.

In addition to enlisting the cooperation of the Traditional Rulers and obtaining their understanding, Government's sensitization campaigns have to be extended to faith based organizations. In the Local Government Areas of Ebonyi State and in other locations, the Women Societies in the faith based organizations are already very highly organized. Thus, the leaders of these female groups need to be encouraged to add value to participatory democracy in the Local Government Areas by showing interests in Local Government elective positions.

Furthermore, as a policy of Government, irrespective of party affiliation, women that successfully emerge candidates of their parties for Local Government elections, especially at the Chairmanship level, should be encouraged with equal amount of token funding, to encourage their campaigns. The value of this fund should only amount to a token, symbolizing gender tolerance in the Local Government System of the State, not that such funds can cover the election expenses of any of the candidates.

Conclusion

Findings of the study have indeed indicated that gender tolerance was almost non-existent in the Local Government System of the Ebonyi State, between 2001 and 2011. Particularly, results of the analyses of how Chairmanship positions were held in the Local Government System of the state, between 2001 and 2011 are truly worrisome; indicating that gender tolerance was almost non-existent at this period, in the Local Government System of the State. This situation has negative implications for participatory democracy in the state. It is not however suggested in this study that participatory democracy is the panacea to gender issues in the local government system of Ebonyi State in particular or the entire Nigerian Local Government System. It is not also implied that participatory democracy is the solution to gender concerns in either Ebonyi State in particular or the entire Nigerian State. The study is a modest attempt to contribute to the ongoing efforts to strengthen democratic practices and standards in Nigeria; as purposeful democracy implies participatory democracy, which in turn must be gender tolerant. This gender tolerance must be rooted in the local government system and every participant in the political process is expected to contribute to the entrenching of gender tolerance, in the local government system in Nigeria.

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