

MARGINALISED GROUP OR ACTIVISTS: A CASE OF NNEWI WOMEN BEFORE 1999

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Abstract

Women have naturally shown interest in social and political concerns since earliest times. It has been observed that some African scholars who attempt to reconstruct history seem to borrow leaf from Eurocentric writers to pitch women as a totally marginalised and relegated group in politics. Such writings point to the fact that women continue to be inaccurately depicted in the forefront of African political history despite the abundance of writing on women and women's history. They are either portrayed as innately inferior or/and subordinate, suffering under male oppression forever. The paper recognises this as a major problem. Thus, against the backdrop, it attempts to correct such notions and reveal that from the pre-colonial period up to the inception of the fourth republic in Nigeria, Nnewi women have constantly played active political and social roles. These roles have established the socio-political relevance of women in the society as well as contributed immensely to societal development. The article adopts the qualitative method of historical research in analysing and interpreting data, with focus on the roles Nnewi women have played in socio-political development before 1999. The choice of 1999 as terminal date was informed by the fact that the said year ushered Nigeria into the Fourth Republic which is still ongoing. Thus the political relevance of Nnewi women cannot be objectively determined until the afore mentioned dispensation comes to an end. It recommends Afrocentric peculiarities/perceptions in African historical reconstruction.

Key Words: Women, politics, Nnewi, Activists.

Introduction

Since time immemorial, Nigerian women in general and Nnewi women in particular, have made tremendous contributions to the socio-political development of the country. The colonial patriarchal system, which emphasized on exclusive dealings with the male population, made visible attempts to exclude women from the political sphere. However, these attempts met staunch resistance from women that established their relevance in the political history of Nigeria.

Emphatically, the attempt to intimidate these women during colonial rule was what directly led to the Women's War of 1929, which marked a significant development in the political history of Nigeria, as it established relevance of women generally. One could argue that these women made a mark in the said year to establish the precedent relevant roles women have continued to play in the political development of Nigeria. In the concluding years of colonial rule, some Nigerian women soon found themselves as activists seeking rapid political development of the entire Nigerian citizenry. Amongst such women activists were Mrs Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, Mrs Magret Ekpo, Mrs Adunni Oluwole, etcetera. The latter was said to have formed a political party known as The Nigerian Commoner's Party which contributed significantly to women's participation in politics until Nigeria's independence in 1960. This party had opposed the rapid

transfer of power to Nigerians at the price of dictatorship of some individuals over the others.¹ Late Fumilayo Ransome Kuti on the other hand was another strong representer of the female folk in politics of the early years of Nigeria's struggle for independence. She was known for her campaign against the subjugation of Nigerian women under colonial administration.² In 1947, Mrs Kuti was the only female member of the National Council for Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) delegate to London to protest against the Richard Constitution, as she was an executive member of the Party at the regional and national level. In London, she was said to have abandoned this course and went ahead to address a press conference on the impoverished state of most Nigerian women. This act alone was accompanied by great criticism from most of her male colleagues.³ She advocated for women franchise and education of the girl-child. Her political activism led to her being described as the 'doyen of female rights' in Nigeria. In 1953, she founded the Federation of Nigerian Women's Society, which subsequently formed an alliance with the Women's International Democratic Federation.⁴ These afore mentioned women activists laid the foundation for the active roles subsequently played by women in the political development of the country.

Historical evidence has shown that Nnewi women particularly in politics, have not been left out in this development course. Prior to 1999, they played crucial roles in the political affairs of Nnewi town and contributed in no small measure in shaping the political system of Nigeria. Examples of such Nnewi women include Calista Nkiru Adimachukwu, Virgy Etiaba, Christy Ikedife, Rita Maduagwu and Nkoli Okoli amongst others, who were known for their efforts in the mobilization of the people of Nnewi to come out en mass and vote into power elected representatives who would govern them. The study is aimed at appreciating these women's effort in the political development of Nigeria.

The signing and ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women by the Nigerian government on the 13th of June 1985,⁵ brought a boost to women's political ambition in the politics of Nnewi, Anambra State, Nigeria. In view of this and recent calls all over the world for women participation in politics, Nigerian women in general, and Nnewi women in particular, began to show keen interest in politics. This paper examines the social and political roles of Nnewi-North women in three subtitles; the pre-colonial period, the colonial period and the immediate post-colonial period until 1999.

Nnewi Women in the Pre-Colonial Era

In the pre-colonial period, Nigerian women in general, played active and productive roles in their respective traditional political settings.⁶ The case was not different for Nnewi women. The Igbo society during the Pre-colonial times operated what would seem a diffused political system. In most traditional Igbo societies, political power was shared between men and women.⁷ Amadiume, had rightly observed that a common feature in many traditional African political system remains that all segments of the society had some representation or voice in the political structures.⁸ The main political body for all adults was the Village Assembly. Every adult member of the society – men or women – had the right to contribute/share their opinions on matters of discussion.⁹ Women were active participants in Igbo Village Assemblies, as well as in community life.¹⁰ According to Nzeogwu¹¹, women's views were important in village assemblies because of the special insight they brought to issues through their spiritual, economic and maternal roles. Age was highly respected and elders were referred to during town meetings for their guidance and wisdom. There existed family groups and each of them managed and controlled its affairs to an extent. The nature of the Traditional Political System paved way for harmonious, efficient and effective gender division of labour in the Igbo political structure. Igbo women in general and Nnewi women in particular exercised direct power

through their various women associations. Rather than competing with the male organisations, women's organisations acted and existed as parallel authority structures. In other words, as leaders or heads of their organisations, women held political power and influence.¹²

Women are generally believed to have been designed divinely to be a helpmate to the men. Some scholars such as Nina Mba¹³, Nwankwo¹⁴ and Ikpe¹⁵ have affirmed that the nature of women's political participation during the period of discourse were complementary rather than subordinate. On this note, they have tremendously assisted their male counterparts in the development of the societies they find themselves in. The development roles played by women during this period were multifaceted; perhaps the most vital role being motherhood.

The major socio-political institution within which Nnewi women featured predominantly is the family which originates in marriage.¹⁶ It has been established that the family is the basic political unit of any society, as it is rooted upon the fundamental basis of every nation. Scholars, philosophers and even theologians have offered their arguments, respectively, on the importance of the family in any given society. As Robert Bork¹⁷ has rightly argued, the influence of the family and the society on every child will determine his or her moral sanity when they come of age. Therefore, it becomes paramount that women's responsibilities towards their children and the society at large are to teach their children - our future leaders - proper morals geared towards socio-political development. Pope John Paul II in *Letter to Families*¹⁸ posits that the family is an institution fundamental to the life of every society, adding that it is the basis for all other institutions, be it in the international community, nation, town or state; as none will exist without the family. Every nation reflects the quality of the family life of its citizens because it is indeed within the family that the original and most important formation of the individual takes place.¹⁹ In the extended family, the woman was regarded as a mother to every member, a wife to her husband and an income earner. The relevance of motherhood, amongst all other roles ascribed to women in the entire Igboland, is deeply enshrined in aspects of Igbo cultural settings and oral tradition. For example, names like *Nneka* (Mother is supreme), *Nneamaka* (Mother is beautiful) and *Nnebuugwu* (Motherhood is honour) and several folklore songs, depict the peoples belief in the supremacy of motherhood. At this time, every woman was addressed as a mother by the society and the bearing and rearing of children fell solely on her shoulders, as it constituted her most important task.²⁰ Motherhood placed women in a strategic position to make vital contributions to the upbringing of future political leaders for societal development. M.O. Ogunlesi in "Women in Paid Employment, Work and Family Roles"²¹, used the concept of Breeder-Feeder-Producer, to describe the contributions of women generally to the development process. Sufficient evidence shows that women in Nnewi during the pre-colonial times had always played the afore mentioned roles. Being feeders of their families, Nnewi women were responsible to a large extent, for the discovery of many edible plants in their environments, such as leaves, grass, roots, nuts, etcetera, which they had used in food preparation to augment whatever their hunting husbands brought back home.²² She further added that the remains of such plants which were usually thrown away around their settlements soon germinated and were tended to by these women. In other words, Nnewi women contributed to the domestication and cultivation of plants by actively and routinely tending to such plants and species which were needed for daily consumption by the family. E.B. Ikpe²³ had affirmed that women were the first to adopt new food crops/plants hitherto unknown in their various societies which was fostered by their continuous search for food variations for the purpose of increased food security. With the arrival of crops from Asia and America from the fifteenth century onwards, women spearheaded the adaptation of such crops to enrich their food options. Since these new crops were usually considered as inferior by the men in Igboland, whose major staple was yam; women cultivated these crops to augment their food options. It has been argued that the

adaptation of new crops into the indigenous food culture helped to liberate women from their near total dependence on the male folk. Crops such as cocoa-yam, maize and cassava became important and imbibed into the Igbo food culture through the innovative contributions of the women. Njoku²⁴ had stressed that such crops were important especially during the period of food scarcity known as the *Unwu* in Igboland when the food crops harvested the previous season had been replanted or consumed. According to him, during *Unwu*, the Igbo depended largely upon wild foods collected mainly by the women.²⁵ The same applied to the development of animal husbandry in the region, as women were the first to care for animals brought back from hunting. From such animals, the domesticated breed must have emerged. The foregoing goes a long way to show the essential contributions women have made in the development of agriculture and animal husbandry in the society. The argument is that, if these women had successfully brought about gainful developments in these spheres, even more could be attributed to them in the political sphere, as they were responsible for the moral upbringing of their children (the future political leaders) during the period under review.

In the area of peace keeping, Nnewi women played important roles as agents of peace in families during the pre-colonial times. To achieve a sustainable and meaningful development in a given society, the importance of peace cannot be underplayed. There have been ongoing arguments among scholars that the successful attainment of peace in a family lies solely in the hands of the woman.²⁶ The most notable body amongst Nnewi women responsible for ensuring peaceful co-existence within the family is the *Umuada* (a political unit of married daughters) and the *OtuuUmunwanyi* (Women Association). During the pre-colonial times, these groups engaged in conflict resolution and the *Umuada* in some cases acted as the final arbiters especially in matters concerning women. In some occasions, they even had a way of influencing the decisions of the *Umunna* (Kindred Association) which was officially considered the highest political body at the time in the entire Igboland.²⁷ These women as a group or individually, often opted to abandon their homely duties or perhaps, excommunicate themselves from the entire society as punitive measures in a bid to maintain peace. For example, in the 1890's, one Obiora from the family of MaziUdoma Okeke who lived in the now Umudim area in Nnewi, was said to have killed a Python (*Eke*).²⁸ The Nnewi tradition insists on performing of burial rites for this reptile by any family who is found guilty of killing it, as this was highly forbidden in the town. However, the MaziUdoma family at the time were one of the families in Nnewi who had accepted the Christian faith being preached by European missionaries and thus had refused to abide by this tradition, claiming it was against their newly found faith. Before a decision was pronounced by the *Umunna*, a number of Nnewi women were seen protesting against the MaziUdoma's family, abandoning their homely duties and walking the streets of Udoma's compound singing abusive songs.²⁹ One could argue that their actions of these women had played a great role to hasten the decision taken on this family by the community.

Historical evidence from pre-colonial times has shown that Igbo women played leading and constructive roles in the political spheres of the country and have contributed in no small measure in shaping the political system in Nigeria. For example, in Nnewi, there exists the *Ndi Iyom* (Village Wives Association) – a group whose collective actions could influence most of the decisions of the town.³⁰ Through this association, Nnewi women could act against an individual or group of individuals or decision which they consider non-favourable by staging protest movements, singing abusive songs and refusing to retire to their families until their demands were met. They sometimes refused to cook, denied the men of their conjugal rights as husbands and threatened to leave en mass. Since the men took these refusals/denials and threats seriously, the women often successfully pursued their goals and interests through such actions and agitations. A good example was seen in the MaziUdochi's family who lived in the

place now recognised as Uruagu Nnewi in the 1700s.³¹ Oral tradition had it that he married three wives – Adamma, Obioma and Adaugo. He however also had an estranged concubine, who was said to have bewitched him into maltreating/disregarding his three wives; one of which had committed suicide out of heartbreak. The remaining two who were also members of the Village Wives Association were said to have abandoned their home and went to live in the forest, excommunicating themselves from MaziUdochi as punitive measure.³² By doing this, these women had denied their husband his conjugal rights as well as other homely duties in a bid to effect change.

Significantly, there existed political institutions such as the *Omu* (Female Chiefs or Queen mother) who often led the women and successfully mobilized them for societal services and political actions when necessary. Such female chiefs were active in the area known as Onitsha in the late Nineteenth Century.³³ Worthy to note is that Nnewi, as we know today was formally the headquarters of the Southern Onitsha district until 1976.³⁴ For instance, her Highness, Chief Nwagboka Egwuatu of Ogbeotu village, was one of the female *Omu* from the pre-colonial times in the region.³⁵ She was a successful merchant and her success in the mobilization of women in pursuit of their interests was rumoured to have led to great antagonism between her and the *Ndichie* (Council of Chiefs). The fact that this woman was one of the signatories to the Treaty of Protection between the British and the region during the Nineteenth Century³⁶, goes a long way to ascertain the remarkable statute of women in politics during the pre-colonial times.

Women also played vital roles in the religious and health field. They function mostly as Priestesses of deities. Their propitiation of the earth and fertility goddess according to Ochieze³⁷, dispelled fears, gave assurances/feeling of security and well being in the society. As these women were largely responsible for the purification and preservation of spiritual health of the community, they find themselves in and have contributed to the psychological equilibrium necessary for societal development. On the other hand, Nnewi women during the pre-colonial period in Eastern Nigeria, served as traditional birth attendants.³⁸ They played dominant roles in the reproductive sphere and child medicine. As birth attendants, women were involved in developing ways and means of easing discomforts during pregnancy and ensuring safe deliveries. Plants, roots and herbs among others were discovered for the pre-natal and post-natal care of women and their offspring. Through this medium, women were solely responsible for the continued existence of a healthy society.

Nnewi Women in the Colonial Era

By 1900, Nigeria was under effective occupation of British colonial rule. With the establishment of colonial rule, the nature and condition of women in Nigeria was transformed in important and significant ways. The changes according to scholars such as Onwuka Njoku³⁹, Chima Korie⁴⁰, amongst others, were as a result of the patriarchal nature and structure of the colonial society that emerged. These scholars argued that efforts made by the colonial government to create policies and environment conducive for the socio-political cum economic exploitation and domination led to the subordination of women as well as women resistance throughout the colonial periods. The colonial policies had caused women to readjust to new roles. Although the colonial system opened new avenues to women in their participation in societal development, it had its own prejudices against women as it was seen as unfavourable to the development of women as the administration treated women as though they had been invisible.⁴¹ In other words, Nnewi women's contributions to the socio-political development of the region were grossly underplayed by the colonial government. As earlier established, this

was based on the fact that the colonial masters traced the attainment of their political goals to a direct dealing with men. The prejudices against women were thus evident in many areas.

At first, the introduction of the indirect rule system in Igboland in 1914 had made the political status of women in this region to experience a great decline in political participation, because the system was one in which power was concentrated in the hands of appointed Warrant Chiefs who were chosen arbitrarily and constituted mainly of the male folk; thereby effectively “excluding” women from all colonial state political structures.⁴² This introduced a number of problems and abuses. According to Virginia Galbraith⁴³, the status of women during the colonial era was degradingly poor. In her own words:

*The British rule in Africa, as elsewhere was male centred and dominated by the upper class English perception of women incompetence to hold economic and political positions. Furthermore, given the decentralized method by which the British ruled, they required an educated naïve civil service and so, educational opportunities were made available to male Africans. There was no place for women to go. They could not go back to their traditional role as these were swept away by local administrators and they could not go forward for lack of education.*⁴⁴

The inclusion of Western Education by the colonial government in the scheme for administrative positions in Nigeria had dealt a blow to the political ambitions of these women. The traditional intellectuals and western-educated leaders had acted as representatives of British administration, enforcing colonial laws and mediating local disputes that were hitherto adjudicated through an egalitarian system, thereby breaking with local political tradition.⁴⁵ Prior to colonialism, the educational policy of the missionary societies who were the pioneers of western education, had prejudice against women. For instance, it took thirteen years after the establishment of the first Grammar school in Nigeria in 1859 – The C.M.S Grammar School (which was by the way exclusively for boys) before its female counterpart was founded in 1872.⁴⁶ The result of this was that by 1920, the ratio of boys to girls in secondary school was 35:1 and by 1965, the total number of girls in Southern Nigeria who enrolled into school stood at 23,143 as against 157,746 boys.⁴⁷ This disparity which was not addressed by the British before the inclusion of Western Education in the scheme for administrative position had unarguably affected the roles played by women. In other words, since education became a prerequisite for acquisition of political power during the period of study, it is expected that women’s participation in politics would be consequently poor. However, the extent to which this system stalled women’s political participation has remained a subject of argument between scholars.

Historical evidences show that Native Courts were also set up in all colonies to administer justice in accordance with metropolitan laws. According to Afigbo⁴⁸, Native traditions were ignored. He further hinted that even in these courts, the main offices open to Nigerian citizens, in general, were clerical works and that of interpreters. Here again, the educated male became more qualified for jobs. As a result of mutual suspicion, ignorance and fear between these locals and the British authorities, problems such as the exclusion of women in the scheme of things that would have been addressed early, were put on hold until they came to a boiling point.⁴⁹ To this effect, women judicial functions were taken over by the courts. In Igboland, the colonial government in 1901, banned political institutions and after 1933 reforms, the native administration was in a position to impose the ban.⁵⁰ Since the colonial administration reduced the powers of women associations and chiefs, it weakened and undermined women political and official powers and together with the Native Courts, it was natural to assume that the days of women council was over. The colonial enterprise was carried out by males who saw the

place of women ideally in the home and so they attempted a total relegation of women to the background and even robbed them of some of their traditional roles. They were accorded neither say nor representation in the colonial system and colonial economic policies seem to have partly robbed them of their traditional means of livelihood. As Nina Mba⁵¹ had rightfully observed, women under colonial administration had felt victimized and deprived. This was the bases of women's political actions which culminated in various protest movements aimed at structural change to the statuesque of the colonial system which became prevalent in the Eastern part of Nigeria throughout the colonial times. These constant protests were mainly against various colonial policies which were considered unfavourable to women's wellbeing in general. These women from the early 1900s till 1960 (when Nigeria attained independence from British rule) found themselves engaging in active politics via protest, against different colonial ordinances. For instance, the market Ordinances Rule No. 17 of 1924 which provided for the payment of tolls in markets had provoked riots in some parts of Eastern Nigeria.⁵² Perhaps, the most widespread and significant of this protest was the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 also known as the Women's War of 1929. This war culminated Nnewi women's effort amongst others. It saw to the massive mobilization of women from all parts of eastern Nigeria. They all assembled in Aba to protest the indirect rule system imposed by the Colonial Lords through the Warrant Chiefs. These riots engulfed the whole Eastern Nigeria. Women at different stages protested against the fall in produce prices, the introduction of direct taxation, the great depression which was widespread all over the world which had brought great hardship on the masses and the fall in exchange price of the Manila to the British Coins.⁵³ Since all of the above resulted in the reduction of women's economic power, women saw these development as part of Europeans conspiracy to improvish them.

Indeed, the Women's War of 1929 has been interpreted differently by different scholars.⁵⁴ Judith Van Allen⁵⁵ have analysed the event as a means of political vocalization. Such protests by women were to continue throughout the colonial times against one policy or the other which went against these women's ambitions or goals. Afigbo⁵⁶ refers to it as an anti-colonial movement aimed at the destruction of the Warrant Chief system and ultimately the dismantling of colonial rule. Coleman⁵⁷ had tagged it "Traditional Nationalism" which essentially laid the foundation for the development of nationalist movements in Nigeria. Several other protests by these women had further made the remaining days of colonial rule unbearable. As Ngozi Ojiakor had observed, in 1949, the colonial police had killed about twenty-one miners who were protesting the non-payment of mine allowances provided for in the Coal Mineral Ordinance.⁵⁸ Following this development, women were mobilized in all parts of the Eastern Provincial areas, now recognised as Nnewi, Okigwe, Onitsha, Calabar, Port-Harcourt etcetera to demonstrate against these killings.⁵⁹ They demanded the prosecution of all the policemen involved in the shooting, condemning the colonial policies in all its ramifications. These women also demanded compensation from the government for the families of the slain miners.⁶⁰

The role of Nnewi women in the politics of Nigeria during the colonial period cannot be complete without mentioning the roles they played in the formation and control of political parties in the 1940s. By 1950, three political parties were formed during the Nationalist Movements – the National Council for Nigeria and Cameroon founded in 1944, the Action Group formed in 1947 and the Northern People's Congress formed in 1949. Nnewi women were members of the NCNC and participated in various party campaigns and sensitization.^{61,62}

Nnewi Women in the Immediate Post-Independence Nigeria up to 1999

After so many years of British rule, Nigeria gained her independence in 1960. At the time, one could argue that there was not much difference in the activities of Nnewi women in politics when being compared to the colonial days, as the colonial ideology towards women's participation in politics was still fresh in the minds of the First Republican politicians and Leaders whom Frantz Fanon⁶³ had tagged "National Bourgeoisies", being that they carried unto independent Africa, the ideologies of colonial past. It would seem that women at this time were still seen as second-class political activists, which gave the men an edge in acquiring more privileged positions in Nigerian politics, generally. The 1960-1966 administration saw few Igbo women occupying political positions/seats. In the Southern House of Assembly for instance, only two women were members – Mrs Margaret Ekpo and Mrs Janet Muokelu⁶⁴; none of which were from Nnewi. All the political parties had male dominated structures which provided room for the marginal positions of women especially in the party's decision making.⁶⁵ Ochieze⁶⁶ had affirmed that women were indeed highly marginalized through under-representation during the First Republic and no direct policy of the central government or regional governments were geared towards addressing the situation.

The imposition of military rule in Nigeria, did not help much in fostering women's political participation either, as very little was heard of women in the helm of affairs. Military regimes were somewhat an all-male administration and women only played peripheral roles per say.⁶⁷ In other words, although colonialism introduced the twist that saw the enumeration of women in politics, the intrusion of the military into politics had aggravated it. Nigeria fell into a long era of military regimes from 1966-1979 and again from 1984-1999. Important to note is the fact that on 15th January, 1966, when the military struck, all democratic structures as well as the constitution were abolished, giving room for a tyrannic/autocratic rule in a totalitarian form by military officers who happened to be majorly men. Three main councils were set up for the administration of the country. They were the Supreme Military Council, the Federal Executive Council and the Advisory Judicial Committee.⁶⁸ Records have shown that no woman was a member of these councils which had the authority to deliberate and govern the country. Some scholars have termed this period (1966-1979) an era of "less visibility of women"⁶⁹ in the politics of Nnewi, Anambra State and Nigeria in general. Even the proper functioning of women organisations as pressure groups were deterred during the Obasanjo regime for example, since they were banned.⁷⁰

Successive regimes had imbibed the same pattern of rulership and made little move towards addressing the situation. They did somewhat little in the accordance of semblance and recognition to women and uplifting women's positions in politics. It is arguable that the background to this could be traced to the disposition of the military towards the women folk. According to Anya⁷¹, the Nigerian military which was retained after British rule had virtually inconsequential role for women. They (women) were not expected to belong to the contributing force of the military which automatically connotes that they were not given the opportunity to contribute their own quota in most military administrations. Except for the Gowon's military regime which appointed Flora NwapaNwakuche – a female political activist from the eastern region – as one of the commissioners of the state, the Ironsi and Murtala/Obasanjo regimes had invariably sidelined the women folk especially in respect to appointed political seats, notwithstanding the lip services their administrations paid to women issues.⁷²

New hope for Nnewi women to participate in the politics of Nigeria at large began to emerge with the transition to civil rule in Nigeria in 1979. The civilian administration of Shehu Shagari was to give women a new leverage in political participation. Women actively began joining political parties once again and few of them in the Southeast in general, contested the elections

and became actively involved in politics as women wing leaders and advisers. For instance, Mrs Okwo, Mama Theresa of Enugu State was one of the founding members of the defunct Nigeria People's Party and the Treasurer of the Presidential Campaign Team of the Late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe – NPP presidential candidate in 1979.⁷³ Nnewi women such as Christy ikedife, NkoliOkoli, Joy N. Nwokoye, and their likes, were seen participating in politics through their membership of political parties. As Aina⁷⁴ had rightfully observed, women's political participation had witnessed an upward turn but showed a low profile participation in politically elected offices at the time. Regardless, this paper argues that a handful representation of these women in politically appointed and elected seats does not justify the marginalisation clause pitched by some scholars. Rather it undermines other admirable active roles these women played as members of the political parties, especially in campaign exercises and as electorates.

The progress achieved in Nnewi women's participation in politics of Nigeria by the Shagari administration was however eroded with the coming of the Buhari Military regime which had no action policy aimed at sustaining or improving women participation. At this stage, it could be said that the activities of women were brought to a state of comatose.⁷⁵

Until the Babangida regime in 1985 which overthrew the Buhari administration, such programmes as the "Better Life for Rural Women" as well as the introduction of the 'First Lady phenomenon', which were integral parts of the Babangida regime, had once again resuscitated and positioned women generally for active roles in Nigerian politics. The Better Life for Rural Women Programme, was aimed at women empowerment in the social, economic and political spheres of the country, which was implemented through the office of the then First Lady – Myriam Babangida. Even though this programme failed to accomplish most of its prospects/goals⁷⁶, it served as an avenue for some women's political ambitions. The fact that Maryam Babangida was unwilling to take the back seat and thus projected herself and Nigerian women in the Better Life for Rural Women Programme, significantly highlighted the need for these women's empowerment and went a long way in encouraging some Nnewi women's active participation in the socio-political cum economic spheres in the country. One could also argue that the re-emergence of the First Lady era was as a result of the global happenings at the time, as this period fell into the period of the United Nations declaration of the World Decade for Women.⁷⁷ Thus issues of women which were mainly the centre of discussion around the world during the 1980s and early 1990s through series of international conferences seems to have informed the choice of the Babangida administration in giving relevance to women's participation in politics. The build up to the 4th World Conference on Women Beijing 1995(which called for at least 30% women representation in government positions) and the emergence of Human Right Groups in the early 1990s following the long years of military dictatorship amongst others, paved the way for the much needed increased female participation in politics.⁷⁸ For example, Hon. Mrs Joy N. Nwokoye was the Sole Administrator of Nnewi – North Local Government Area from September 1991 to December, 1991 before the election of Hon. Barr. A.E. Enumah as the Executive Chairman in December 1991.⁷⁹ In the federal general elections of 1993, organized by the Babangida administration, Nnewi women were able to take advantage of the democratic process by voting into power an elected candidate who would govern them. However, with the annulment of the 1993 general elections in Nigeria by Babangida, one could argue that whatever progress these women had reached in the politics, met a rather downward turn.

With the resignation of the Babangida administration following the backlash over his annulment of elections of 1993, an Interim National Government (the Shonekan

Administration) was set up which lasted for only three months before it was ousted by the military government of General Sani Abacha. The Abacha regime witnessed another era of the First Lady trend which served as an avenue for women's political participation in the country. The Family Support Programme – one of the agricultural improvement schemes⁸⁰ introduced in the country by the Abacha's administration - was implemented through the office of the First Lady. This promoted the visibility of wives of governors and president across the country in the formulation and adaptation of policies that would encourage more women representation in rural and urban politics. The Abacha regime however, saw Nnewi women participate more in local government elections. They contested for government positions in the local government level and voted massively to gain such political positions. Their efforts perhaps paid off with the emergence of Hon. Christy Ikedife as the Local Government Councillor of Otolu Ward II in 1997, however, her tenure ended abruptly with the exit of the Abacha administration in 1998.⁸¹

Conclusion

The nature of Igbo political structure in the Pre-Colonial times had created the avenue for the culmination of both gender – men and women – in the decision making process of the society for total upliftment and development. Nnewi women had played active roles in politics through various institutions as the *Umuada* and *Omu* systems among others. Despite the myriad of problem women encountered in their political ambitions from the colonial period up through the immediate post independent Nigeria, Nnewi women's participation in the socio-political sphere featured progressive attempts and impressive results. The 1970s up through the 1990s had reawakened the consciousness of women towards their political ambitions through the instrumentality of various international conferences. Various conferences, seminars, symposia and workshops were organised by the United Nations (UN), International Women Tribute Centre (IWTC) and a couple of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The centre-point of these conferences that culminated in women empowerment, as well as the elimination of violence and all forms of discrimination against women amongst others, informed women's collective decision to be actively involved in the politics of the society they find themselves in, both in the state and international level. As Ngozi Orjiakor⁸² had rightfully observed, these conferences had greatly imparted on these women by radically changing their attitudes towards politics and caused them to take their rightful place in the politics at the federal, state and local government levels.

The paper strongly reiterates that the notion of women being sidelined in Nigerian politics of early times is not entirely true. Historical evidence has proven otherwise. The peculiarities of Nnewi women in politics showcase active participation. Their occupation of political seats must not be the only yardstick for measuring their active political participation. Thus, it is important that writers who may attempt historical reconstruction in the future should imbibe Afrocentric peculiarities/perceptions.

Endnotes

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