

## WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS: A MORE VERITABLE WAY TO PROMOTING WITED IDEALS

**Otache Ngbede Ameh & Elizabeth Musa**

The Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Ogun State, Nigeria  
[ngbedeigbeltd@gmail.com](mailto:ngbedeigbeltd@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

A study of the political history of Nigeria, like any other democratic society reveals that shaping or reshaping a course requires initiating enabling policies. Similarly, it is becoming increasingly clear in the wake of our deeper understanding of democracy that it is impossible to do things outside existing policies. It is therefore apposite that any form of restructuring in an organized society should commence with either amending the existing policies or initiating new policies that would support the entire idea. Therefore, it should be mentioned that driving the ideals of Women In Technical Education & Employment (WITED) requires putting in place favourable policies. However, it is instructive to state that initiating such policies demands that more women who are well disposed to the WITED ideals are put in the boardrooms, legislative chambers and other strategic places where they could be in commanding positions to do the needful. On this premise, it must be stated that the acid test of women's sincerity towards promoting the ideals of WITED would be their resolve to participate in the politics of their environments to ensure that more women are part of the decision/policy making process. For instance, the edge that those from 'educationally less advantaged states' as well as the 'disabled' enjoy in the admission process into higher educational institutions today is a product of such favourable policies. It is in the light of the above that this paper seeks to explain that women participation in politics is critical to promoting WITED ideals.

**Keywords:** gender balance, politics, technical education, women empowerment.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to explain that one of the fundamental instruments that would ensure the thriving of WITED is politics, (i.e. the actual participation of women in politics). This assumption is hinged on the understanding that every organized society operates based on principles, existing and documented policies/laws. This work also attempts to unravel, from historical point of view, the involvement of Nigerian women in technical, vocational and innovative activities during the pre-colonial era. It reveals that the aforementioned era saw huge participation of women in vocational and innovative ventures as it was being bequeathed from generations to generations until the advent of colonialism. However, following a successful entrenchment of colonial administration, there was a downturn in the level of women engagement in technical activities generally, and particularly in educational sector due to unfavourable policies of the colonial government.

Thus, the work maintains that the gender disparity in technical education in Nigeria today is traceable to the policies and drives of the colonial lords who saw women as weak and unfit for such venture. This has been validated by the proposition of Bola Udegbe when he mentioned that, with the colonial rule, came a denial of equal access to power and resources for women. Thus, the era was characterized by women's disenfranchisement and massive erosion of their political and economic powers (Udegbe, 1981). Similarly, Toyin Falola asserted that the most serious threat to the influence and privileges of women occurred during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when patriarchy combined with colonial changes to alter gender relations. As male chiefs collaborated with the British colonial administration in collecting taxes and governing, the position of women declined in importance. When the economy became increasingly geared toward the production of cash crops for export, Nigerian men and European firms dominated the distribution of rubber, cocoa, groundnut (peanuts) and palm oil. Women, pushed to the background, were forced to shift to the subsistence crops. Western-style education also favoured boys over girls and thus largely excluded women from many of the new occupations (including but not limited to technical/vocational education) introduced by colonial administration (Falola, 1995). While attempting to explain the rationale behind the colonial decision to sideline women from public administration and vocational activities at the time they did, Gloria Chukwu argued that the colonial administrators came to Nigeria with western gender stereotype. Their treatment of Nigerian women was based on ideas about "women's fragility and dependence" (Chuku, 1995). With the above propositions and analysis, it becomes

increasingly clear that it was the colonial policies that systematically relegated and detached women from taking part in political, technical and economic activities.

Against this backdrop, this work posits that a more veritable way of encouraging more women to take part in technical education is to devise a means of putting women who are well disposed to the ideals of WITED in the legislative chambers or boardrooms. This will enable them to frame favourable policies that would bring about an influx of more women into technical education.

Accordingly, this paper is partially, a call for more women participation in politics in order to initiate ideas and provide opportunity for interested women to undertake technical and vocational education. This becomes imperative due to the assumption that the involvement of more women in technical, vocational and innovative ventures would aid boosting the economy of Nigeria.

Finally, the work concludes that since women were discouraged from taking part in technical education via unfavourable policies (of the colonial lords), it would take favourable policies to ensure their restoration in technical and vocational ventures. It maintains that the need to bring more women into technical education is imperative in view of the huge gap between male and female gender in technical education viz-a-viz the need to empower more women due to their indubitable economic value to the national economy. In this instance, the involvement and contribution of women to the economy of Rwanda remains a reference point.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

For clarification and in-depth understanding of the subject and the direction of this research, it is important to conceptualise the term, politics which remains a key term in the topic under consideration. Equally, the concept of technical education will be explained and analysed in line with the assumption of this research work with a particular focus on the Nigerian society.

Thus, Elone J. Nwabuzor and Martha Mueller defined politics as a struggle over the distribution of scarce resources by decision-makers in any social group. The social group may be as small as a family or a club; it may be as large as a public corporation, an army or the state apparatus of any given country. This ubiquitous nature of politics has been noted by many who (sometimes condemningly) refer to their rivals in social groups as 'politicking' either for certain benefits, or for the avoidance of certain costs or obligations (Nwabuzor & et'al, 1985). The above definition of politics as a struggle among different groups over the distribution of scarce resources for the benefit of the public is instructive given this research assumption for a number of reasons. First, it reveals that in every given society, there is the tendency to struggle for scarce resources. The resources in this context, is the opportunity for more women in technical education. Second, it purports to explain that until one struggles for the available resources, they are not accessible. This clearly validates the need for women to struggle by participating in politics which could reposition them to access the available resources. Third, it shows that the distribution of scarce resources among the contending forces or groups is a function of existing policies. This aspect validates the research assumption that the thriving of WITED ideals could be facilitated when there are favourable policies.

In the light of the above, Harold D. Lasswell defines politics as being concerned with 'who gets what, when, how' (Lasswell, 1936). This fundamental political question partly captures the concept of politics as used in the research topic. It should be stressed that the question of who get what, when and how in any organized society like Nigeria, can be satisfactorily answered by existing policies which define what is due to what group, when and how.

In the same vein, Easton defines politics as a system of interaction in any society through which binding or authoritative allocations are made (Easton, 1969). Drawing from this definition, one of the fundamental questions is, to what extent are women involved in the interaction of their society through which binding or authoritative allocations of resources are made?

Arguably, the collective definitions of politics as stated above has helped in substantiating the concept of politics as used in the context of the research topic, though with limitations on their parts. Nonetheless, they have assisted in shedding light on the concept of politics generally, and has equally aided in shaping our focus.

On the other hand, according to Technical Instruction Act of 1889, the expression, 'technical education' shall mean instruction in the principles of science and art applicable to industries, and in the application of special branches of science and art to specific industries or employments. Samuelson stated in 1890 that technical education was 'everything which prepares a man and woman for work he or she intends to pursue'. Millis stated in 1925 that 'the

objectives of technical education were to provide instruction in the principles of art and science applicable to industry and in the application of special branches of art and science to specific industries and employment’.

From the above explanations, it becomes clear that technical education is a branch of education (either art or science) that involves acquiring skills and vocations as it relates to industries and employment for self sufficiency. This clarification indicates that the applicability of the kind of education under discussion to industries, generation of employments and actual contributions to national economy as well as individual economic empowerment is more important than mere theories. Indeed, it shows that while it is not out of place to study theories and formulae of courses of instructions that constitute technical education, the actual acquisition of basic skills and vocations that are relevant to industries and employment generations is of paramount interest.

Interestingly, the Polytechnic sub-sector was created to provide manpower in technical education. Perhaps, this is the factor that provides justification for the rooting of WITED in the Polytechnics sub-sector.

### 3. EVOLUTION OF WITED: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Women constitute a technical, intellectual and moral factor of undoubted value, and thus we see them feature in the fields of science, art and of politics, excelling with extraordinary ease, with the supreme majesty of their moral vigour and by the irresistible force of their feminine charms (Morton, 1962).

Although, the concept of WITED (i.e. Women in Technical Education and Employment (WITED) was coined in 1988, a study of African women activities from the earliest period reveals that African women have been participating in technical, vocational and innovative ventures at informal levels. For instance, it is on record that African women were deeply into technical engagements such as weaving of baskets and cloths, making of clay pots, local beer-brewing, mining, manufacturing, among other artistic works. Undoubtedly, this provided impetus for the springing up of local industries with attendant employments for both male and female gender during the pre-colonial era.

The above assertion suggests that women, among other fields of endeavours, are proven principal actors in technical activities from the time immemorial. Admittedly, African societies in the pre-colonial era did not have a refined education system compared to what is obtained today. Nevertheless, the involvement of women in technical ventures can neither be undermined nor over-emphasized. Consequently, scholars of African origin have argued that women in the period under review played notable roles in governance, economy, military and socio-cultural spheres. In line with this argument, Bolanle Awe opined that during the period under consideration, some women were the ‘saviours of their societies’ due to their technical skills that impacted positively on the economy of their various communities (Awe, 2001).

In the light of this, Eno Blankson averred that the role of women in traditional African economy was enormous. From time immemorial, the business of production/manufacturing had engaged the attention of women in various parts of Africa. It was also not uncommon to find women both in production, manufacturing and exchange of goods in market places. For instance, In Benin kingdom, women were deeply involved in agriculture, which is implicatively technically inclined, and had slaves who worked in their farms (Blankson, 2009). Similarly, Niara Sudarkasa’s survey on the Yoruba women showed that women were farmers, traders and craft producers in the pre-colonial period. Women employed their time in shelling the kernel from the palm nuts and sometimes tending poultry and livestock for the market. They also engaged in palm oil making, nut oil production from the kernels of palm nuts as well as shear butter for the industries (Sudarkasa, 1973).

Another technical and industrial venture that enjoyed the attention of women during the period under focus was beer-brewing from guinea corn or maize as a refreshing drink for the household, visitors and commercial purposes. An empirical study of indigenous economy of Africa in the pre-colonial period reveals that women, particularly, Nigerian women were into the production of different brands of drinks for various reasons, including domestic, festivals, commercial and even rituals. For example, Buganda women specialized in the production of local gin similar to the gin produced in the Niger Delta of Urhobo and Itsekiri kingdoms. Against the Eurocentric perception that there was a transferred technology of liquor into Africa, it was discovered that there was an indigenous production of liquor in Africa especially in the coastal communities of East Africa and the Niger-Delta region before the advent of the European invaders. The women of Kalabari and Andoni were also involved in local gin production. The European

attempt to forestall the transfer of this technology to other parts of Nigeria and Africa prompted them to label it 'illicit commodity' as it was a form of currency (liquor or spirits) in parts of African societies during the period (Nzemeka, 2009).

The Hausa women were not left out in the area of technical or vocational activities. For instance, the Hausa women involved in the production and sale of refreshing milk drinks called *fura dinunnu* and milk yoghurt. Other drinks were processed from millet and guinea corns as *kunnu drink* and when fermented was used in the processing of local beer called *burukutu* (Nzemeka, 2009). However, the level of Hausa women in technical and vocational activities was drastically reduced following the introduction and embracement of Islamic religion which clearly negated the idea of women appearance in public for such engagements. Among the Igbos, V. C. Uchendu argued that women were deeply involved in the production of palm oil, weaving of baskets and cloths among other agricultural activities. The Igbo women were equally into making of pottery objects and were in command of the resources and skills necessary for the production of wooden and earthen wares or materials (Uchendu, 1965). It was also recorded that in other parts of Africa, particularly in Uganda, women combined farming and building constructions during the period in question (Kiwanuka, 1971). The Tiv and Idoma women like others in the old Kwararafa kingdom were said to be involved in the weaving of native wears, making of different kinds of clay plates and pots as well as thatch roofs among others.

Generally, Nigerian women in the pre-colonial era were not only actively involved in technical and industrial activities, they were also innovative and creative in driving the local industries. For instance, in the old Kanem Bornu Empire, Magira Aisa Kuli who acted as the regent in the said Empire between 1562 and 1569 initiated local irrigation methods to boost the agricultural activities and food production (Blankson, 1997). In like manner, in the history of Benin Empire, there was a woman who was said to have contributed immensely to the food culture and cookery art of the Empire and was deified in Bini tradition (Nzemeka, 2009). The contribution of women was also visible in mining and manufacturing. In the traditional societies of Ile-Ife and Benin Kingdom, women were into copper and tin mining as well as bronze casting.

Thus, it has been well established that women actually dominated the technical departments of the local industries of their various communities during the pre-colonial era. Equally, the women dominated the medical aspect as it relates to health, healing, baby-delivery, among others. Although, these were done 'informally' or auxiliary and therefore, did not involve the use formulae like the western education style, they are undoubtedly practically technical.

Unfortunately, despite the huge involvement of women in technical activities during the pre-colonial period, not much has been written concerning it. This constitutes a challenge to women scholars who may wish to review women activities in the past in order to be adequately guided on how women have evolved over time with a view to providing creditable direction for the future. Consequently, Eno Blankson asserted that there have been concerns about how to redeem the silence on the female gender in traditional historical writings. These writings were usually not gender conscious. Thus, historical events were narrated as if women were not in existence, not even as victims (Blankson, 2009).

On the other hand, despite the huge involvement of women in technical activities during the pre-colonial period as revealed above, it was conspicuously observed that there was a downturn in this area during the colonial period. Indisputably, the colonial administration is clearly contemporaneous with the dwindling participation of women in technical and vocational activities. This position has been validated by the proposition of Gloria Chuku when she asserted that women did not benefit much from the colonial administration, especially in relation to what they contributed to the system. They (women) did not receive any encouragement or support in terms of trainings to acquire new technical skills from the colonial government like their men counterpart (Chuku, 1995). It was in reaction against this trend among others, that there was Aba Women Riot in 1929.

In the same vein, the Christian missionaries also advocated the colonial policy of relinquishing women from political, social and economic pursuits. Though the Christian missionaries imparted western education on girls and initiated the practice of sending girls to school yet, followed different curriculum for boys and girls. For instance, in missionary schools and special training centres that dispensed academic courses, the girls were taught domestic science, European's women skills and etiquette and the Bible in vernacular languages. In fact, it was the Christian missionaries who controlled the western educational system that transmitted perhaps, unwittingly and unconsciously, female inferiority and served discrimination in Nigerian economic and political affairs as a part of Western civilization which lowered the social status of women at that time (Uchendu, 1965). In the early decades of colonial rule, the missionary centres also trained girls for Christian wifehood and motherhood but not for modern day employment whereas the

boys were given technical instructions so as to equip them for transport and mining industry, clerical jobs in native courts, colonial offices and trading companies (Uchendu, 1965). Perceptively, Hafkin and Bay observed that:

Missionaries were not necessarily against women participation in politics; clergies in England could be found supporting women's suffrage in America but in Africa, their concern was the Church and for the needed Christian families. Therefore, Christian wives and mothers not female political leaders and technical instructors were the missions' aim. As Mary Slessor, the influential Calabar missionary, said: "God-like motherhood is the finest sphere for the women, and the way to the redemption of the world". As the English language and other knowledge of "book" became necessary to political life, women were increasingly cut out and policy making became less public (Hafkin & Bay, 1982).

It is in the light of the preceding arguments that it was pointed out that the colonial era could be considered the most uneventful period in the area of women participation and representation in politics, economic and technical departments despite the fact that there were records of women's resistances.

Indisputably, every altercation modifies the existing patterns of society. In this instance, the colonial political arrangement proved to be prejudicial to women even in the economic and technical domains. Therefore, it should be mentioned that the European intrusion caused the erosion of women's technical and economic contributions. The dimension, expansion and nature of trade during the colonial era which is the interest of the 'mother country' resulted in diminishing the importance of women in all spheres. Consequently, colonialism fostered sex based stratification of economy by initiating young men to take over trading and manufacturing bastions previously held by women. This structure which had been maintained even after the colonial period, depicts an unfairness and injustice against women due to their relegation to the background hence, the urgent need for restructuring towards an enduring and equitable gender-balanced arrangement for the purpose of promoting women and engendering sustainable development.

In an attempt to avert this trend following Nigerian independence, and in pursuant of relevant positions in all sectors, women have over time organized themselves into different groups in order to be more formidable in their fight to seek for more opportunities towards a balanced society. For example, WIMBIZ – Women in Management, Business and Public Service CEO/Polycymakers, STEM – Women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, among other feministic-inclined organizations.

In this wise, it is believed that the creation of WITED is partially a response to the perceived imbalance between men and women in technical education.

#### **4. POLITICS AS A VERITABLE TOOL FOR PROMOTING WITED IDEALS**

The participation of women in politics is of strategic importance not only for women empowerment, but because it has governance and wider benefits and impact (Olojede, 1999).

The above assertion is a declaration of the British Council Gender; a feministic organization that seeks for improved empowerment of female gender. In the light of this, scholars have argued emphatically that the development of any country requires the participation of both men and women. In this instance, equal opportunities for both men and women in technical and vocational education which the colonial administration ignored without apology is of great importance. In fact, there is a global recognition that gender equality in all ramifications of life is a fundamental aspect of modern democratic governance. It is expected that both men and women should have equal rights and opportunities to participate fully in all aspects and at all levels of socio-political, economic and academic activities. But in practice, women faced challenges and the number of women in leadership and decision-making positions is abysmally low. Meanwhile, it has been proven that countries with increased women's participation in politics and leadership positions tend to be more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic. Hence, they tend to develop faster than others due to their conscious efforts to tap into the potentials of women in the governance process. Similarly, Business executives have maintained that Nigeria stands to gain economically if women are encouraged to participate more in the decision making process in corporate environment and in the legislature. This constitutes part of the perception that women all over the world are catalysts for development and change.

Thus, canvassing for support for gender equality is not just a consequence of democratization, but also a part of a broad cultural change that is transforming industrialized and developing societies and bringing growing mass demand for increased democratic institutions. Even though, the legal contest and academic debate between masculinity and feminism is undeniable, a more objective position tends to admit that women have been marginalized, hence the need for them have a common front to interrogate the status-quo. Apparently, WITED have emerged to challenge the said status-quo and ensure that more women are given opportunities to get involved in technical education. However, the extent in which success can be achieved in this area largely depends on their readiness to take active part in politics.

In any organized democratic society, politics is the launching pad into power and other sensitive positions. It is therefore impossible to access power and positions of authority to initiate, formulate, implement and enforce policies outside politics. Hence, the criticality of politics to creating the enabling environment and drive the ideals of WITED. Consequent upon the seemingly non-participation of women in politics, men have continued to occupy all the available space to the detriment of their women counterparts.

It is against this backdrop that Abiola Akiode-Afolabi pointed out that it is questionable that it is only or majorly men that are formulating policies and taking decisions on issues that affect both men and women. Perceptively, politics and political arrangement in Nigeria has undermined female legitimacy resulting in women's political powerlessness. Statistically, women's overall political representation and participation in government is less than 7% in Nigeria (Akiode-Afolabi, 2013). As a result, nothing is done to change this unbalanced structure. It is likely that this narrative will remain unchanged if women do not rise to take their destinies in their own hands. Understandably, the definition of politics as a struggle for scarce resources posits that women should struggle for power by getting involved in politics in order to achieve set goals. Thus, WITED as a body should vigorously participate in politics (at national or local levels) and continue to link up with women politicians to sell their ideas. For instance, a policy of gender equality in the admission of candidates into academic departments that constitute technical education will go a long way to help WITED achieve her aims and objectives of getting more women into technical education.

Thus, the call for women active participation in politics includes but not limited to national politics. Women could take active part in the politics of their immediate environments. For instance, the newly signed Polytechnic Act stipulates that the Deans and Heads of Department should be elected and not appointed. This provision provides opportunity for women (female staff of all Polytechnics) to develop their political capacity by networking with each other in order to take advantage of this innovation and elect more women into the positions of Deans and Heads of Department. This is particularly important in view of the abysmal statistics against female gender with regard to the office of the Rector, Deputy Rector, Registrar, Deans and Heads of Department in the Polytechnic sub-sector viz-a-viz the female students in technical departments. It is instructive in this wise, to state that WITED should develop itself into a strong political force and elect her members who are well disposed to her ideals rather than just being gender sensitive. This will enable them to challenge the present status-quo and alter the narrative in favour of women.

It must be mentioned emphatically that it was in appreciation of the political factor (i.e. active participation of women in politics or act of establishing a robust relationship with female politicians) in driving the ideals of 'TechWomen Program' – an initiative of the United States Department of State's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs that its leaders visited Nigeria (Lagos and Abuja) between 18<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2018 respectively to mentor young women and girls to spark their interest in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields. This was effectively carried out by collaborating with some prominent Nigerian women (politicians) such as Senator Binta Masi Garba. At the plenary session, Senator Binta Masi Garba while stressing the need to initiate favourable policies that would encourage more girls to study Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, lamented over poor representation of women in politics when she stated that there are only six (6) women senators out of one hundred and nine (109) senators in the Upper Chamber of National Assembly (i.e. 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly). However, after the 2019 general elections, the number of female senators is seven (7) out of the total of one hundred and nine (109) available seats. The number of female members of the House of Representatives dropped from nineteen (19) to eleven (11) out of the available three hundred and sixty (360) seats. In like manner, there were only had six (6) female cabinet members, out of thirty-seven (37) during the first tenure of Buhari's administration. This constitutes a huge challenge for women in terms of statistics viz-a-viz the struggle for available resources and favourable policies for women.

Therefore, it should be emphasized that the call for more Women in Technical Education and Employment would gain the desired credibility if women find their way into politics which is the basis for accessing power.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Apparently, from the preceding arguments, women in the various areas that constitute the present day Nigeria dominated technical and vocational departments during the pre-colonial era. However, the intrusion and commencement of colonial administration with its attendant unfavourable policies utterly altered the narratives. Unfortunately, this was upheld by the successive administrations after Nigerian independence, hence the gender disparity as observed in the technical education today.

In the wake of this understanding, WITED and other NGOs have emerged to challenge the status-quo and attempt to bring about gender balance in technical education with approximate equality. In particular, the efforts of WITED in this regard should be applauded on the premise that tapping into the potentials of women is sine qua non to putting Nigeria on the path of meaningful development.

However, this paper maintains that making a fundamental breakthrough in gender evenness in technical education is a matter of policy via participation in politics. Accordingly, the breaking away of women from the stereotype of political apathy and their actual involvement in politics which is the launch pad into power where favourable policies could be made and implemented constitutes an acid test of their resolve to promoting the basic ideals of WITED. In other words, women absence or scantiness in the corridors of power suggests lack of seriousness of intention towards resolving gender disparity, particularly more women enrolment into technical education. Alternatively, the paper opines that WITED should initiate a robust relationship with women in power to sell her objectives and crave for such policies that would provide wide opportunities for females in technical education.

Finally, in the face of the increasing excruciating economic hardship in which women and children are most vulnerable, any policy or effort that would encourage women to take part in technical and vocational ventures would be an escape route out of impoverishment.

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