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### THE UNDER-REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

Nigeria returned to democratic rule after years of military governance, in the year 1999. Twenty-one years and five national elections down the line, only a handful of women have been privileged to hold public offices. The mission to increase women's representation in Nigerian politics seemed to be going strong during the 2019 general elections. This was evident in the vast number of political parties, and number of women who expressed interest in and eventually contested in the party primaries. However, anyone who thought that this would have a favourable outcome for these women was met with dashed hopes<sup>1</sup>. It is sad to see that in a country where 49.4% of its population is female, only a meagre 6.7% of currently elected and appointed political officials are women<sup>2</sup>. This disturbing data begs the question "Where are all the women in politics"?

The factors responsible for the lack of women's representation in Nigerian politics are vast and varied. They range from ineffective government policies, to lower levels of female employment and education, sexist attitudes towards women (which may emerge from religious and traditional beliefs), and even violence and hate speech against female candidates during elections<sup>3</sup>. Despite having exemplary female figures whom have proven on both a national and international level that women are capable in politics, such women include the late Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti; one of Nigeria's feminist pioneers and founder of the Abeokuta women's union and leading figure in the anti-colonial movement, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala; the former minister of finance who went on to become the managing director of the world bank from 2007 to 2011 and the late Dora Akunyili; former minister of information and culture, who excelled during her tenure as director general of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) to mention a few. Nigerian women still fight tooth and nail against a barrage of factors just to be allowed into public office. One of such prominent factors is sexist cultural stereotypes; this misogynistic belief held by many that a women's sole responsibility is to take cater to her husband, children and manage the home as a whole, therefore things such as political participation should be of no concern to her. In 2019 a Nigerian lawmaker in the house of representatives, Gudaji Kazaure warned against giving women too much power lest male politicians "come here one day and find out that women are everywhere in this chamber and they will mess up". Likewise, the story of Aminat Aji a female politician from Kano state, who declared her bid to join the Senate on behalf of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in 2003. Aji said that despite having the backing of her family she still faced hostility and stiff opposition from male politicians who said that a Muslim woman has no business in politics. These male politicians went on to tear down her posters and sabotage her campaign. Aji lost the election. Although this was years ago, little has changed since then. This sort of primitive and misogynistic ideology underscores the need to have more women in political power.

Another major factor causing the lack of representation of women in Nigerian politics, is the government policies surrounding the issue of female representation in Nigerian politics itself. The Nigerian government lacks sound legislation on the representation of women in politics

and is reluctant to implement such laws despite "supporting" this movement on paper. There are no formal bans put in place deterring women from ascending political office. The 1999 Nigerian constitution guarantees equal political rights for both genders. The national gender policy of 2006 also recommends a benchmark of 35% seats in parliament to be filled by women, and Nigeria endorses subscribes to several international agreements promoting the representation of women in politics such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women<sup>3</sup> (CEDAW) of 1985 and many like this, yet these are not reflected in our current political system. A system where only seven women currently hold ministerial positions out of sixty two, a system where there are only seven women in the Senate out of a possible hundred and nine seats and only 4.17 percent of all elected officials are female<sup>4</sup>. Advocacy groups such as the Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC) and the Nigerian Women Trust Fund (NWTf) are pushing for more government action and a reform of electoral laws concerning increasing the representation of women in politics. However, legislators have largely resisted implementing such measures and have thrown out several bills promoting gender equality in politics on unreasonable grounds. Unsurprising for a country whose constitution does not explicitly specify a freedom from discrimination<sup>3</sup>. The few women who do make it into public offices are, in most cases; political figure heads with nominal political power, while men actually pull the strings from the shadows. These female political figure heads hold little to no actual power and are therefore unable to influence any actual change in their male dominated environment.

The implications of this gender imbalance in Nigerian politics are quite numerous but are most pronounced when men are left to debate and legislate on matters and issues affecting women and girls. Studies have shown that when more women participate in government, the whole society benefits, as women are more concerned about social services and such, because they use these services more than their male counterparts<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the lack of female representation in Nigeria's political system is detrimental not only to women but society as a whole.

Several civil societies and non-governmental organisations have created programmes aimed at increasing women's representation, such as "The Young Women Leadership Project", Voices for Change (V4C), "The Policy Advice and Legal Centre (PLAC)"<sup>1,3</sup> and many others. However, a lot more individual and collective effort is needed to fight this gross form of gender inequality in Nigeria, level the playing field for both genders and subsequently increase the representation of women in Nigerian politics.

## REFERENCES

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