

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's Feminism and Women's Political Participation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigerian women have encountered a number of problems while venturing into politics because there is a large scale discrimination from the male folk both in voting for candidates and allocating political offices. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti noted that women's inequality in Nigeria is deeply rooted in colonial leadership. Before colonialism, there was division of labour between men and women, women owned property and exercised considerable political and social influence on society. This paper analyses the contents of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's feminism, her contributions in solving this problem, as well as an analysis of Nigerian women's participation in politics, with special focus from the 1999 general elections till date. This work also defends the theory of equal opportunity which recognizes the fact that men and women are different, and not equal, but seek for equal opportunity in political participation for both sexes knowing fully well that anyone whether male or female, insofar he or she has the qualifications should not be marginalized.

Keywords: Gender, Politics, Justice, Feminism, Marginalization

Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of his or her country.¹ It thus presupposes the establishment of equal representation for both genders, and that all segments and needs relating to all citizenry of the society are duly represented.² But a look at the political participation chart of Nigeria since the democratic dispensation, tells a different story about our democracy. Women are highly under represented at most levels of government, especially in ministerial and other executive and even legislative bodies. They continue to struggle against the patriarchal nature of our society which has given ascendancy to men in politics, authority and decision making. This is paradoxical because women constitute about 56% of the country's total population, thus a better proportion of participation is expected from the womenfolk.

This issue becomes even more problematic due to the fact that a careful look into Nigerian political history before the whole democratization process and even the advent of British colonization shows that Nigerian women had access to political power and played prominent roles in decision making in the Nigerian society. Prominent among such women are: Princess Inikpi of Igalaland and Moremi of Ife,³ Queen Amina of Zazzau, a renowned military and political leader,⁴ the women of Aba who partook in the famous 1929 "Aba Women's Riot" in which over 50 women lost their lives fighting against injustice. Also, in ancient Benin, Queen Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie, exemplified her bravery and leadership skills as the first woman in Benin history to go to war, and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti whose leadership of the Abeokuta women union projected and promoted special interest of women.⁵

In contrast to these exemplary figures of precolonial Nigeria, the present crop of women activists and those who are fortunate enough to be prominent politically only prefer to show off, rather than engage issues that could liberate women and reposition them for greater and better political involvement. Hence, we are now faced with the problem of the current crop of women who have not represented their gender positively at the national level, and a patriarchal society has not given relevance to women in the country's politics.

The scope of this paper is limited to Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's feminism vis-à-vis the marginalization of Nigerian women in politics, with special attention on how women have fared in politics from the 1999 to 2015 general elections and the different factors responsible for this misrepresentation. However, relevant ideas by other feminist philosophers will be employed in buttressing the positions of Funmilayo where necessary.

Gender Equality and Feminism

Gender refers to the characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between masculinity and femininity. Depending on the context, these characteristics may include biological sex, sex-based social structures, or gender identity.⁶ Rubin Gayle in *the traffic in women* notes that gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes, and a product of the social relations of sexuality,⁷ a social organization of sexual differences. This work shall interpret gender as the hierarchical division between women and men embedded in both social institutions and social practices.⁸

Gender equality therefore refers to a situation where women and men having equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and potentials, are able to contribute equally to national, political, economic, social and cultural development and benefit equally from the results.⁹ It also refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys, it implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration.¹⁰ Thus gender equality

demands same rights, status and opportunities as others, regardless of one's gender. Equality is therefore understood to include both formal equality and substantive equality, and not merely simple equality to men.¹¹

Feminism is a highly debatable concept. The concept of feminism, according to George Ukagba, is the understanding of women, their experiences and that of the world they live in, by which they seek for order and unity amidst the multiplicity and diversity that surrounds them.¹² This term has been broadly defined as the struggle for the liberation of women, and encompasses epistemologies, methodologies, theories and modes of activism that seek to bring an end to the oppression and subordination of women by men.¹³ George Ukagba expresses that feminism is both a theoretical concept and a practical movement or view of life. As a movement feminism has its history,¹⁴ which can be traced to France, while as a theoretical concept, popular Nigerian novelist and feminist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, sees feminism as a belief in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes.¹⁵ In the same vein, the new *International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary* defines feminism as a doctrine which supports and encourages the equality of genders (male and female) and advocates equal social, political, religious and economical rights of women.¹⁶

Biography of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, originally known as Frances Abigail Olufunmilayo Thomas, also called Funmilayo Anikulakpo Kuti, was born on the 25th of October 1900 in Egbaland, Abeokuta.¹⁷ She attended the Abeokuta Grammar school as the first female student. She then moved on to study in England. She was a married woman of four children, a daughter and three sons, and undoubtedly, the most well-known child was Fela Anikulakpo-Kuti, renowned for his musical career and radical political activism.¹⁸ In 1932, she helped organize the Abeokuta Ladies Club (ALC), whose name was later changed in 1946 to the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU). It was later renamed as Nigerian Women's Union (NWU) in 1949 and the

Federation of Nigerian Women's Society (FNWS) in 1953.¹⁹ Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's leadership at these various unions was very notable.

Due to her activism, she was more or less seen as an enemy of the state, and in 1977, some 1000 soldiers stormed the family property in Lagos, and during the assault, soldiers dragged Funmilayo by her hair and threw her out a second story window. The complications from the injuries she sustained eventually led to her death that year.²⁰ Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a foremost Nigerian feminist, has been described as an eloquent and compelling speaker who efficiently used expressive, witty and idiomatic language.

Theorizing Women Marginalization

To a considerable extent, gender inequality has been a subsidiary issue in the Nigeria society. The traditional social structures have been offering limited incentives for amending the existing distributive power between men and women. As observed, the Nigerian society has been significantly dotted with peculiar cultural practices that are potentially harmful to women's emancipation, such as early marriage, wife inheritance and widowhood practices. Gaidzwanwa (2007) asserts that domestic education as enshrined in the ideology of 'housewifcation' which was a social engineering initiative designed to create suitable wives for indigenous colonial employees further disempowered women socially and economically.²¹ He argued that the relegation of women as mere housewives with the task of taking care of the home and the needs of their husbands limited them in so many ways. Subsequently, the colonial exclusion of women from most sectors of the formal labour market for domestic work's engagement which were largely unrewarded has been observed as one of the most formidable factors responsible for women's marginal significance in contemporary African societies.²² Thus, since the advent of colonialism, women have always been exposed to varying forms of discrimination due to the simple fact of their femaleness which ought to have been understood on the

basis of its mutual usefulness. This discriminatory gender ascription persisted after the end of colonial rule in Nigeria, and was further worsened by the long years of military rule in Nigeria.

With the effect of colonialism still in the mainstream of Nigerian politics, Nnamani (2010) noted that men usually lay claim to the right to control women, using both physical might and intellectual justifications to maintain male supremacy and female inferiority.²³ They present themselves as superior to women in all areas of life; they are to be seen but not heard, their voices do not count nor are their contributions considered. They were indeed marginalized. Eguavoen (2017) prefers to term this marginalization, "political violence"²⁴. This, she arrived at as a result of the fact that politics is the power base for any society, bearing in mind that policy and decision making are integral parts of any economic, social and political activities in present day society.²⁵ Thus if women are not given a place in this process, then it is violence against them. Omoye (2012) traces this violence to the right to vote, in that while men started voting in 1922, women in all parts of the country started in 1979, a difference of 57years²⁶. One would have thought that after we gained our independence women would be considered almost immediately, but they had to wait another 19years to be allowed into the political terrain through voting alone. Claude Ake (1990) claims that the surrogate post-independence political elite deliberately weakened women organizations, hitherto involved in active agitation for liberation by enhancing the militarization of the polity and increasing the statism of the economy.²⁷

Opaluwah (2007), however, opines that the coordination of gender advocacy based on indigenous patriarchal anxieties about meaningful gender equity, external pressure and western prescriptions has had far-reaching consequences for womenfolk.²⁸ Furthermore, he held that our unbridled openness to western influence by the political leadership has equally worsened the depending dilemma, with the west providing

us with anything but participative emancipation.²⁹

Despite the pronounced commitment of the international community to gender equality and bridging the gender gap in the formal political arena, reinforced by the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the United Nations on Dec. 18, 1979, and the Beijing platform of action, women are highly marginalized and are poorly represented in political activities. This is evident in the results and statistics of women political participation in Nigeria since 1999 and also calls for a sober reflection and rethinking. Omoye ascribed this unfairness to discriminatory laws, gender blind policies, lack of political will, patriarchy, godfatherism, corruption, illegalities, rigging, oppression, manipulation, poverty, illiteracy, timidity amidst others.³⁰ Furthermore, Eguavoen sees the major hindrance to women political participation in Nigeria as one of mentoring, they have nobody to mentor and no one wants to be their mentor either. Godfatherism, which may help them foot the financial implications is also not an open option for them, hence they end up singing for the male electorates and soliciting for votes for them.³¹

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and the Effect of Colonialism on Nigerian Women

In one of her articles entitled "We had Equality till Britain came", Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti argues that colonialism had marginalized Nigerian women in the political and economic spheres and oppressed them with unjust taxes while denying them the right to vote.³² She argues that colonialism brought many changes to the African traditional society, especially in the role of women. It displaced Nigerian women by hounding them to the home front while their male counterparts were empowered through education and leadership positions. Furthermore, she maintains that colonialism destroyed the very organized and equitable Nigerian society where subjugation and oppression of women was not an issue, and that even after the disappearance of the

colonial masters, the Nigerian leaders who were placed in charge of the affairs of the country, continued in this wrong and negative practice.

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's Abeokuta Women Union

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's Abeokuta Ladies' Club, later renamed the Abeokuta or Egba Women's Union (AWU), was grounded in local political practice, but was also adaptable to the requirements of the new, national politics. The AWU consisted majorly of market women³³ who were integrated into the organization's membership and leadership. Yoruba was the main language of communication, and Yoruba forms of dressing, rather than European, became the rule.³⁴ The organization possessed its own detailed constitution, and could boast of very large membership. Its stated objectives were to protect and preserve the rights of women in Egbaland; to encourage mass education among all women members through literacy classes; to draw together women of all classes and cultural backgrounds; and to support any organization fighting for the economic and political independence of the Nigerian people, or of any oppressed group of people.³⁵ The AWU made a considerable number of achievements including a protest which led to the abdication of the Alake, who was paid by the colonial government to enforce its gender-differentiated tax laws, first introduced in Abeokuta in 1918, and a protest which led to the end of the confiscation of their goods; also national and international expansion.³⁶

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's Nigerian Women's Union

The efforts made by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, at eliminating marginalization of Abeokuta women, later met its national and international expansion. The Abeokuta Women's Union, later renamed the Nigerian Women's Union (1949), became a model organization for the struggle for women's rights across Nigeria. It opened branches in Calabar, Aba, Benin, Lagos, Ibadan and Enugu and even reached Kano in the north. Its importance lay in drawing women together

across linguistic and cultural differences, in efficient organization, and in insisting upon shared struggles and a shared humanity, at a time when national politics was collapsing into ethnic division. It also became a model for women's organizations in West Africa (Ghana and Sierra Leone), Asia (China) and Europe (the Soviet Union).³⁷

The 1999 Constitution and the Place of Women in Nigeria Politics

The right to full and active political participation by all citizens of the country is an entitlement conferred on all citizens by law. The Nigerian 1999 constitution (as amended) spells-out this privilege very clearly in chapter four, section 42(1) on the 'Right to freedom from discrimination' as follows:

A citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion shall not, by reason only that he is such a person be subjected to any form of discrimination. The above excerpts show that any man or woman can proceed to court to seek redress if his or her right to franchise is being violated and that the constitution in its entirety prohibits discriminations of any kind on the basis of sex or otherwise.³⁸

The foregoing shows that the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which of course is the reference point for social co-existence amongst groups and persons has not by any means discriminated against anyone, man or woman in the socio-political scheme of things. It is therefore unjustifiable for men to want to dominate the Nigerian political scene and hence, push women to the corner.

Women in Electoral Politics in Nigeria

Lester Milbrath, while commenting on the state of Nigerian women in politics, classified political activities into three, namely; gladiatorial activities, transitional activities and spectator activities. Political activities such as holding public or party offices,

canvassing for party funds, contesting at election, etc. are classified under gladiatorial activities. Transitional activities also include activities such as attending political meetings or political rally, making monetary contribution to political parties, etc. Spectator activities, on the other hand, include political activities such as wearing of party badges, caps, uniforms or emblems, running errands for political leaders, voting at elections etc. According to Milbrath's classification, the gladiatorial activities, had always favoured the male gender in Nigeria from independence till date. On the other hand, available statistics also confirm that the female gender in Nigeria, in most instances, and for several reasons, participate in politics at the least level of Milbrath's classification of political activities; the spectator activities. Here, women are mostly engaged in rallies and campaign activities where the uniforms, caps and badges of respective political parties are freely displayed on them. More often than not, the female gender is easily mobilized for the election victory of male candidates who are more financially buoyant than their female counterparts. This marginalization of women from the gladiatorial and transitional activities is clearly reflected in the statistics of the 1999 to 2015 general elections. The table below captures these statistics:

S/ N	Position	No. of avail able seats	No. of women elected and percentage total				
			1999	2003	2007	2011	2015
1.	Presiden cy	1	0	0	0	0	0
2.	Senate	109	3	4	9	8	8
3.	House of Represen tative	360	12	21	27	24	13
4.	Governo rship	36	0	0	0	0	N/ A
5.	State House of Assembl y	990	12	38	54	68	N/ A

The above table shows the extent to which women were grossly underrepresented in elective positions from 1999 till 2015. Similar

trends were also witnessed in appointive positions under successive regimes in Nigeria.

Factors Affecting Women's Participation in Politics and Decision Making

The challenges militating against women participation in politics and decision making are indeed manifold. However, we shall consider the very important and rather pertinent ones.

Funding: Statistics have shown that about 85% of women in Nigeria currently live below the poverty line and unfortunately, politics is an expensive venture requiring huge financial involvement.³⁹ As such, the cost of realizing electoral ambitions is still far beyond the reach of most women, especially in the absence of a godfather who is willing to foot the bill in exchange for unlimited favor when the seat is eventually secured.⁴⁰

Religious Discrimination: Politics in this part of the world is seen as a dirty game and sacrilegious due to irregularities such as vote buying, ballot box stuffing, arson, assassination of political opponents, violence and the likes. As such, many religions use these abnormalities as an instrument of stereotype against women who venture into politics. They believe that engaging in this kind of misdemeanors by adherent of true worshipers of God is bad. It therefore becomes a critical element in scaring away persons or groups from politics.

Cultural Hindrances: Women are discouraged from participating in public life from childhood through adulthood by authority figures such as fathers, mothers, husbands, and other relations due to the cultural image of a virtuous woman, defined as quiet, submissive, and who should be seen and not heard.⁴¹ According to the social-biological school suggested by Ritzer, women were naturally and biologically inferior to men. Hence, women "as a result of their inferiority, did 'menial' duties of cooking, housekeeping and domestic coining, while men fought war, went hunting and performed the hard tasks".⁴² It is this programming that assigns to men the 'hard' life of politics and leadership, governance and headship and to

women, the 'soft' life of mother, home-tenders and housekeepers.⁴³

Women's Perception of Politics: Nigerians are awash daily with tales and news of dishonest and disreputable practice of some politicians. Thus, the common perception of politics is that it is a dirty trade that is reserved for people of questionable integrity who have little regards for the rule of law and due process.⁴⁴ Therefore, women in politics are seen either as partners in crime or abettors of the vile committed by the political class. In order to avoid the discoloration of blot associated with politicking, some women prefer to stay out or take a backseat.⁴⁵

Political Violence: A female aspirant, Dorothy Nyone, who stated the tales of her personal ordeal narrated that "A ward chairman was shot dead; all the women and most of the men fled the scene. My husband rushed there and took me home. I was scared; men who were fully prepared for the violence were the only ones who remained behind to hand pick the various winners".⁴⁶ This tale typically illustrates electoral violence in Nigeria; one that is characterized with political assassination, incessant political thuggery and general violence. These have made the female folk dread politics, and it has become something out-of-the-way for most women.⁴⁷

Illiteracy or Low Level of Education: A major social disadvantage for women in politics is mass illiteracy or low levels of education. A survey carried out by UNICEF revealed that only 60% of women aged 30-45 years manage to complete their elementary education and only 26% proceeded to the secondary level. Similarly, a survey by the National Planning Commission indicates that 50% of women had no formal education.⁴⁸ This invariably translates to why comparably few numbers of women qualify for the jobs in the formal sector. The limited number of educated women also account for why only few women present themselves as candidates for elective positions.

Lack of Effective Means of Implementation of Affirmative Action: The affirmative action is usually a measure intended to supplement non-discrimination. It is a broad term

encompassing a host of policies that seek to support weak groups in society, especially women. They include policies where deliberate action is used to stop discrimination.⁴⁹ Thus, a policy process of this kind, allows for rules that have the objectives of enhancing equal opportunity for the individuals and the improvements in the situation of marginalized groups. The intentions of the affirmative action looks favourable to women, however the major problem is the lack of implementation, and this appears to be a mosaic affecting virtually all nation states of the world in terms of the place of women in both elective and appointive offices.

Evaluation

The fact that Nigeria is a patriarchal society cannot be disputed. This is a feature that is noticeable in many aspects of her national life. Politically, the inequality experienced has continued to draw the attention of many, especially with today's changing world. The history of the Nigerian traditional society recorded both male and female leaders in the socio-political structures of the society. However, at a point in history, all these changed, these privileges were cut short, or even removed totally, and women no longer occupied those positions which made them leaders. Having been pushed and pressed hard against their will, there was need for an urgent response to this cruel patriarchal society. In response, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti took it upon herself to fight this system with all she had. As a conservative, she worked tirelessly to improve the position of women especially the poor, uneducated, and underprivileged ones; as a developmentalist, through her unions, she was able to improve the standard of women, through education and other activities; as a feminist, she gave no room for oppression of women, as exemplified through the abdication of the Alake, and in my opinion, if it was in her power, she would have taken up that seat. On the other hand, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's political dissent in the past always had its consequence. She is said to have organized peaceful protests and at some point,

she is said to have organized training sessions at her compound on how to avoid the effects of the tear gas thrown at them during their protests, and instructed them to pick up the canisters of tear gas and throw them back at the police.⁵⁰ This was indeed a very negative approach and form of protest. In another situation, she is said to have challenged the Oro; a personified executive and supernatural power among the Yorubas, at one point, she seized the staff of the Oro and displayed it at her house.⁵¹ This act was a great show of disrespect for traditional and culture which is part of the life of Africans.

Based on historical facts, the Abeokuta women riots and protest brought a large toll on the women, and even though they were not discouraged by this, the effects remained. More so, due to her sojourns in the Eastern Bloc, she was termed a communist, a system which she tried to imbibe into the Nigerian women. Unfortunately, Communism has not been a very favourable political system. As we know, it is the philosophical, social, political, and economic ideology and movement whose ultimate goal is the establishment of the communist society, which is a socio-economic order structured upon the common ownership of the means of production and the absence of social classes, money and the state. Communism as a political system has failed over the years in many countries. They have therefore abandoned it for other political systems. Communism has not recorded many successes. It has sometimes descended into tyranny, and its real world application is impossible. It limits freedom of speech, the government owns all the businesses and properties, central planning is difficult to achieve, consumer's needs are not taken into consideration and the likes. She is therefore criticized in this regard.

Recommendations

The efforts of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and indeed other Nigerian feminists at attaining gender equality are laudable but the outcome of the 2015 general election clearly showed that women are still underrepresented in Nigerian politics. In the bid to resolve this,

the following recommendations become very relevant.

Firstly, there is the urgent need to educate people about the gender difference between a man and a woman as pertaining to their different needs, aspirations, ambitions, objectives and experiences. This will foster tolerance between the both sexes while emphasizing the need for equity and not sole equality as both sexes have different natures, strengths and weaknesses.

Flowing from this, instead of women canvassing for gender equality in politics, the theory of "Equal Opportunity" should be adopted. This theory of Equal Opportunity emphasizes the meritocratic system, where a person is allowed to contest for an election, either a male or a female, if he or she is the best candidate. Consequently, being the best candidate requires certain qualifications but given the fact that women are victims of marginalization, they may not emerge as the best candidates as the educational background, financial, emotional, parental or societal support they have is different from men. In this, there is the need to highlight the concept of equity.

Equity is the process of being fair to women and men. Consequently, since women and men have different experience and backgrounds, they should not only be given equal access to resources and equal opportunities, but also the means of benefiting from this equality. Put differently, the different life experiences and needs of men and women are taken into consideration and compensation is made for women's historical and social disadvantages.

More so, the Nigerian political system or better still, the Nigerian government must work out the most equitable means of harmonizing the diverse energies and talents of its womenfolk. In order to achieve this, there is the need for sustainable human development which can be achieved through bridging gender gaps in politics, economy, education, unemployment, social security and other facets of human lives. Furthermore, political parties should have a clear policy in respect of women's political ambition, as this will help women to know what to do and how

to go about their political venture. Also, religion, instead of preventing women from participating in politics, should do well to enlighten them on the right thing to do so that they can change the system rather than running away from it. From the foregoing, the government should create the political environment that is supportive of and conducive for women's participation.

Finally, women on their part, need to realize that they are not the same with men, hence copying male behavior in order to be relevant in the political scene is not the solution. They have to work differently, and they have their own styles and methods. In addition to this is the need for women to support each other. This idea of sisterhood was a great tool for Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti during her protest against the high level of taxation, where she mobilized women from Abeokuta and elsewhere, from the streets to the palace of the Alake, and went about shedding tears. There was absolutely nothing the Alake and the authorities could do to stop them.⁵² This strength in the unity of women was also experienced in the Aba women's riot. This is also corroborated by Idiat Adebule, who thinks that the lack of synergy among women in the public and private sectors is a contributory factor to the poor representation of women. She says that women need to support one another and work together to achieve collective empowerment in the face of a male-dominated society.⁵³

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that the feminist enterprise of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti is a laudable one. However, while we advocate for more means of bringing women out of their shells, they should realize that politics is just one way of dealing with the issues of justice in our society. The structures/institutions that enhance capacity building, ranging from access to economic empowerment and education will remain a major focus. The feminist phase of the struggle deserves commendation because they have used their access to media and intellectual capital to reshape some of the issues that face women. However, recent

strides in women activism must realize the serious limitations and fragility inherent in the ideological platform on which they seek to articulate their positions. This is not unconnected with the fact that many activists, just like their counterparts elsewhere, have very little root on the ground in terms of how the majority live.

A narrow view of the problems which pretends that the solutions to some of our problems lie in their compartmentalization merely takes us back to the terrains inhabited by those who use religion, tribe, gender or

region to limit our vision. Consequently, the point must be made that women issues have a better chance of being resolved on a political structure that seeks to level the playing field (equity) and ensure justice for all, rather than seeking to increase the mere numerical or physical representation of women on the table of power. After all, the struggle for democracy is aimed at ridding our society of the manipulation of the various differentiations in our society, whether they are ethnic, religious or gender based.

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