Women Advancement and the Prospect of Leadership in Nigeria

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Abstract:
Despite the existence of laws and legislations, women have continued to suffer and face various forms of discrimination and bias in their quest for advancement and leadership, ranging from socio-cultural discrimination to discrimination among employees. In the past and even more recently, women leaders have taken part in various reforms which is geared towards societal development but yet the total number of women leaders is still not enough. The study is an examination of women advancement and the prospects of leadership in Nigeria. The methodology used in this study is mainly the analysis of secondary data from journals, literatures and documentaries. Findings from the study reveals that the leadership style of women have a positive impact in the organization, it was also found that women leaders will succeed in leadership position if given the opportunity. The study recommends inter alia that women leaders should avoid fear of failure especially those who are starting their leadership trajectory paths; the existing women empowerment policies in Nigeria should be reviewed to reflect a true situation and government should create a women leadership network in order for them to share their challenges and successes.

Keywords: Women, advancement, leadership prospects, empowerment

1. Introduction
Since the 21st century began, there is a growing awareness and support globally for woman advancement and their access to leadership opportunities in their chosen careers. Although most of them are often denied access to top management and leadership positions both in the public and private sectors despite the fact that they are qualified and play a greater role in developing the organizations which they belong.

Globally, women occupy a mere 3.8% of fortune 500 chief executive officer seats (Catalyst, 2012) and represents only 3.2% of the heads of boards in the largest companies of the European Union (European Union, 2012). In the political arena the number is slightly better, in 2012 women held only 90 of the 535 seats(16.8%) in the U. S.Congress (Centre for Women and Politics, 2012) and 19.1% of parliamentary seats globally (Inter Parliamentary Union,2012). In 2019, 127 women held seats in the United States congress, comprising 23.7% of the 535 members; 25 women serve in the U. S. senate and 102 women (23.4%) serve in the U. S. House of Representatives. Four women non-voting delegates also represent American Samoa, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands in the United States House of Representatives (Centre for American Women and Politics, 2019). Across countries in the Middle East and North America, women hold 3.2% of overall senior leadership positions particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries-Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates(UAE) they represent less than 1% of organizational leaders. In Saudi Arabia, while over half of college students are women only 4% of college and university presidents are women.

In recent times especially since the reintroduction of democracy in Nigeria which has imposed a new demand on government to foster a more open society and promote a greater role for women in public decision making and leadership(Okoronkwo,2011). It is interesting to note that a greater percentage of women have occupied very vital leadership and administrative positions both in politics since and they have performed incredibly well thereby leaving the public with no doubt about the capacity of women to perform when saddled with responsibilities at all levels. This is evidenced in the performance of women such as; Prof. Dora Akunyili, former Director General National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control and former Minister of Information; Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, former Senior Special Assistant to former President Olusegun Obasanjo on Budget Monitoring and Price Intelligent Unit and former Minister of Education; Mrs. Evelyn Oputa, Managing Director of Nigeria Bank of Industry; Princess Stella Oduah-Ogiemwonyi former Minister of Aviation; Diazani K. Alison-Madueke, former Minister of Transportation, Mines and Steel Development, Petroleum Resources and the first female president of Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries; Prof. Ruqayyatu
Ahmed Rufai, former Minister of Education; Mrs. Ifueko Okaura, former chairperson Federal Inland Revenue Service; Prof. Grace Alele Williams, former Vice Chancellor University of Benin; and Dr. Ngozi Onkonjo-Iweala, former Minister of Finance and Coordinating Minister for the Economy during President’s Olusegun Obasanjo and Good luck Jonathan and world Bank Vice President who worked tirelessly to restore the image of Nigeria women and also played a greater role towards the reduction of Nigeria’s foreign debt. After the 2011 general elections, there has been an improvement in the number of women appointed into various leadership positions in the federal executive council led by President Goodluck Jonathan. Out of forty two ministers appointed before 13th September, 2013 cabinet reshuffle, 13 are women, representing 31.0%. Furthermore, there are 11 female permanent secretaries out of 43 constituting 25% and 5 female Senior Special Assistants out of 13 representing 38%, it also saw the appointment of women into key ministerial positions which hitherto was managed by men for example, Ministries of Petroleum, Education and Aviation. The role of these women have no doubt lifted the pedigree and profile of Nigeria women as hardworking, dedicated, disciplined, thorough, creative, and entrepreneurial. The enormous contribution of these women to National and International development is gradually redefining their role and capabilities in a positive light. However, despite the above achievement it is still conclusive that women participation in leadership and decision making is still very low and inadequate (Asaju & Adagba, 2013). The British Council (2013) indicates that Nigeria currently stands at 118 positions out of 192 countries in terms of gender parity lacking far behind African countries like South Africa (43%) and Rwanda(65%). According to a report by the United Nations Women headquarters (2019) Nigeria ranks 181 out of 193 countries with the percentage of 5.9% of women in parliament lacking far behind Angola (38%), Mozambique (39.6%) and Ethiopia (38.8%).

Women have the potential and ability to lead but they often lack opportunities, resources and finance to support and realize their potentials as this is applicable to both the public and private sector. Given this context, women should be given the opportunity to advance in their chosen areas of endeavors as they have proven to be better leaders. Against this background, this paper is aimed at examining women advancement and the prospects of leadership Nigeria.

2. Statement of the Problems

In spite of the progress made so far towards empowering women to take leadership positions in the public and private sectors they remain marginalized in many ways as their representation in key decision-making positions in critical areas of life remains low. The African society is patriarchal in nature and most household women who are working experience double work load that is being responsible for domestic responsibilities despite entering the work force (Udom; Udom & Nkanta, 2019). Being in management is bound to have an impact on women’s social and personal lives and in turn affect how low they perform (Maseko, 2013). While the men argue that women lack the skills and preparation for leadership positions, women in turn also argue that they are professionally isolated and not integrated into leadership structures, they also complain that men in power are reluctant to elect them to the highest office (Siemienska, 2004).

Furthermore, women themselves can stand on their way to leadership and make the progress slower by questioning their abilities. This phenomenon derives from the traditional expectations that both society and culture set on women, these traditional and cultural practices often pose serious threat and obstacles to women advancement and their performance in leadership especially in Nigeria and other developing countries. According to (Udom; Udom & Nkanta, 2019), women’s own attitude is the second most influential obstacle when getting ahead and most women lack confidence and will power. Some people say that women don’t even want to be leaders and are not willing to work for it as much as men and consider it being the reason for the low number of female leaders, some women do not have the same confidence and will as men when aiming to leadership positions which makes them not to try. Also, starting a family inevitably affects women’s career development and many make the choice to cut down hours at work and prioritize family over career. Several literatures on women advancement and the prospect of leadership seems to agree by acknowledging the significant barriers that exist for women to pursue leadership positions (Catalyst, 2007; Eagley & Carl, 2007; Weyer, 2007). Many stereotypes hold women back from top positions which include: women lack of ambition, women don’t have the right work experience, women don’t have the leadership experience and skills, women don’t have the right problem solving skills, women won’t make the necessary sacrifices, lack of access to informal networks, lack of mentors, lack of access to influential colleagues, lack of role models, lack of stretch assignments, limited flexible work arrangements. Moreover, other studies have equally stated that in entrepreneurial sector the absence of ambition, leadership propensity, and skills are the most visible barriers to success in leadership by women and each of these barriers contributes to questioning the competencies required for women who are aspiring to become leaders in their organizations.

3. Women in Leadership in Nigeria

The general awareness created by the of International women’s year in 1975 on Women Leadership followed by the United Nations decade for women, 1975-1985 (Aina, 1993) and the subsequent UN conferences like the Rio de Jenerio conference on environment and development, the 1993 Vienna Human Rights conference, the 1995 Copenhagen summit on social development and the Beijing world conference which Nigeria participated effectively and signed to its legal document did not only set new priorities, but also produced a blue print for the sustainable role of women in leadership positions.

However, the role of women in leadership positions has set a new center stage in the last three decades and has also generated public debates in Nigeria. Furthermore, there are still divided opinions whether women leadership ends in the home fronts or they should take leadership roles in the larger political and economic organizations (Luka, 2012). The role of women in leadership position in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized, their contributions to National development goes beyond the traditional conception of their roles in family keeping, procreation and permeate all facets of the Nigeria economy. Since antiquity, Nigeria women were seen as inferior, automatically and even subordinate, this was not only
peculiar to Nigeria but also in the world at large. The concept of women in leadership and empowerment started recently in Nigeria when women assuming leadership positions in Nigeria involves many things: Economic opportunity, Social equality and Personal rights. According to Ogie; Akhuetie; Dawodu & Obi (2015), As culture takes a center stage in Nigeria, women have been deprived of leadership rights and the case is even worst in rural areas where women are generally not seen to have any meaningful sources of income as a result they are often incapacitated and neglected in leadership roles and relegated mainly to household, cheap labour and without the earning capacity their voices are silence. Mma(2010) posited that during the colonial era, Nigerian women went through a lot of challenges in order for their voices to be heard, ranging from the denial of franchise and a total exclusion of women from leadership positions and property rights. Furthermore, the Aba women riot of 1929 was carried out to protest against the oppressive taxation system of the then Colonial Government and was led by women. In the 1950s women leadership began to gain momentum in Nigeria by the appointments of three women into administrative and leadership positions in Nigeria: Chief(Mrs.) Olufumilayo Ransome-Kuti(the Western Nigeria House of Chiefs), Chief (Mrs.) Margaret Ekpo and Chief(Mrs.) Janet Mokelu(both of Eastern Nigeria House of Chiefs) were appointed into the house of Chiefs. It was only in the same 1950s that women in Southern Nigeria were given the franchise and the women’s wing of political parties where formed but they possessed very little Rights. Furthermore, women are gradually being appointed into the traditional ruler’s councils in some parts of Igbo and to give women the opportunity and forum where they can express their interets

Nonetheless, such obnoxious practices and scenario has been things of the past as Oranusi (2009) contended that the acquisition of western education has influenced men’s attitude towards women (although not greatly) as well as women's attitude towards their endowed potential. It has made women more confident in themselves and with such confidence there is a great influence in their output especially in leadership and other sectors of the economy. Joining issues with the above assertion, Nzekwe(2011) asserted that the rise of a few women into prominent positions that has hitherto been solely meant for men by the appointment of women into key leadership positions are indication that women in Nigeria are climbing the leadership ladder so rapidly although gradually. The role of women have no doubt lifted the pedigree and profile of Nigerian women as leaders who are hardworking, disciplined, thorough creative, enterprising and productive. However, it is interesting to note here that despite the fact that these women have contributed tremendously in their leadership roles, their men counterparts still belief that they could have done better. The enormous contributions of Nigerian women into leadership and national development in all sectors of the economy is gradually leading to the evaluation of the role and capabilities of women in private and public capacities in a positive light. The reintroduction of democracy in Nigeria has no doubt imposed a new demand on government to Foster a more open society and promote a greater role of women in public decision making (Okoronkwo,2011). This is in realization that until a good number of women hold leadership positions in both the public and private sectors, given the opportunity to initiate, mold and execute public policy and legislation, they cannot effectively tackle the other problems that has bedeviled them. In the political sphere, women themselves have responded to opportunities at all levels with more women association taking advantage of the new political opening to assert their roles and advance their course. But it is still regrettable that even though women constitute a greater number of registered voters in any elections held in Nigeria, they are yet to experience full representative positions (Okoronkwo-Chukwu,2013). The role that women play during electioneering campaigns and voting processes demands that they take prominent positions in governance considering their sacrifices to the success of various political parties in any elections.

Women participation in politics and decision making has witnessed a significant improvement since 1999 over previous experiences, but generally the score card is very low. The general elections saw only 181 positions won by women out of 11,881 available positions throughout the country (Samuel &Segun,2012). In 2003, States like Adamawa, Cross River, Ebonyi, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Nasarawa, Oyo, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara, no woman was elected as member of the house of assembly (Agbalaobi,2010). At the April of 2007 elections, there were 1200 women aspirants to 1532 offices, 660 of these aspirants won their primaries, out of these 660 candidates only 93 finally emerged as winners. Nonetheless, such obnoxious practices and scenario has been things of the past as Oranusi (2009) contended that A range of issues arise in restraining women’s potential to aspire to positions of leadership in Nigeria. Saddie (2005) maintained that at the bottom of the restrictions that women face is the patriarchal system where decision making powers are in the hands of men. In this context, traditional beliefs and cultural attitude concerning the role and status of women in society are still common and many women who are part of this system are finding it difficult to diverge from this culture and tradition they be ostracized. Regardless of women’s education and access to the Job market the women’s role is considered to be the typical one of homemaker. The man on the other hand is the bread winner, head of household and has the right to public life. Furthermore, there are several factors that can be adduced as hindrances to women leadership in Nigeria. These factors are; cultural and religious discrimination, lack of self-confidence, illiteracy or low level of education and financial challenges.

4. Challenges of Women in Leadership in Nigeria

A range of issues arise in restraining women’s potential to aspire to positions of leadership in Nigeria. Saddie (2005) maintained that at the bottom of the restrictions that women face is the patriarchal system where decision making powers are in the hands of men. In this context, traditional beliefs and cultural attitude concerning the role and status of women in society are still common and many women who are part of this system are finding it difficult to diverge from this culture and tradition they be ostracized. Regardless of women’s education and access to the Job market the women’s role is considered to be the typical one of homemaker. The man on the other hand is the bread winner, head of household and has the right to public life. Furthermore, there are several factors that can be adduced as hindrances to women leadership in Nigeria. These factors are; cultural and religious discrimination, lack of self-confidence, illiteracy or low level of education and financial challenges.

4.1. Cultural and Religious Discrimination

Women are discouraged from participating in leadership roles and public life from childhood through adulthood by authority figures such as father, mother, husbands, and other relations due to cultural image of a virtuous woman defined as quiet, submissive who should be seen and not heard(Muoghalu &Abrifor,2012). These cultural orientations
constitute disincentives for women participation in leadership. Similarly, religion is also used as instruments of stereotype against women who venture into politics or as barriers to prevent them from taking leadership roles. Different religions assign some roles according to gender (Okeke, 2019) as Aichison (2007) posits that “All world religions today maintain male social dominance within a social structure”. For example, Pudah- which is the restrictions of women to their quarters predominantly in practice among Muslims in Northern Nigeria ensures that they are barred from participating or taking leadership positions in organizations and politics either as voters, aspirants or even participants in economic activities and Islamic religion does not permit a woman to become Imam. Likewise, the Christian faith also does not accord women much role in public life as the Holy Bible has contented “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence”(1Timothy2:12, KJV) and another portion that says “For the husband is the head of the wife” (Ephesians 5:24), all these have contributed in making women perpetually restricted.

4.2. Lack of Self Confidence

One of the major challenges facing women in leadership positions are women themselves. Most women lack confidence in their own ability and capacity to lead. In most cases, they feel that leadership is exclusively reserved for men and women dare not venture into it, and those who manage to venture are usually contented with the backseat. Similarly, many women don’t have confidence in the leadership abilities of their fellow women. Although factors like envy, jealousy and other problems associated with interpersonal relations are common with women; generally, most women would rather allow a man to lead them than their fellow women despite their numerical strength. This has often given the men an upper hand when it comes to mobilizing support for any leadership position.

4.3. Illiteracy or Low Level of Education

A major social disadvantage for women in leadership is mass illiteracy or low level of education. A survey carried out by UNICEF in Nigeria in 2004 revealed that only 60% of women ages 30-45years manage to complete their elementary education and only 26% proceed to the secondary level. Similarly, another survey carried out by the National Planning Commission indicates that 50% of women have no formal education (Okpilike & Abamba, 2013). Corroborating this, a survey carried out by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2014 reveals that primary school enrollment increased from 45.7% in 2010 to 47.9% in 2013, secondary school enrollment also increased from 45.3% in 2010 to 47.3% in 2013 and women constitute the lowest proportion of teachers at the tertiary level of education which is 25.5% in 2013 (National bureau of statistics, 2014). This invariably translates to why comparably few numbers of women qualify for jobs in the formal sector. The limited number of educated women also account for why only few women present themselves to take leadership positions.

4.4. Financial Challenges

Lack of capital and inability to raise money for campaigns and consultations of all forms before elected into leadership positions has also been identified as a factor militating against women’s participation in Nigeria’s leadership process. Generally, all over the world political campaigns are very expensive; in fact it has been regarded as a capital intensive project. It is particularly expensive in Nigeria because money, rather than merits, determines who hold leadership positions which hallowed to the monetization of social issues. Since women are not usually in the lucrative professions or business due to their low level of education, it apparently becomes difficult for them to afford or raise the kind of huge amount of money required for leadership positions in Nigeria, unlike their male counterparts who could raise money to finance campaigns and leadership positions. In Nigeria today the current amount for the Presidential nomination forms for 2019 election has been fixed for N10million Naira for the PDP and N45million Naira for the APC and it is on record that the major political parties in Nigeria the APC and PDP made a total of N3.8bn from sale of 2019 election forms (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2019). Record also shows that the current President of Nigeria Collected loan of N25m to purchase the 2015 APC presidential nomination form which makes it difficult for women to contest for such positions because they are financially incapacitated and have little or no property in their name to use as collateral in bank that will enable them obtain loan facility.

4.5. Theoretical Explanation

The theoretical framework of analysis adopted for this study is the liberal feminist theory. Liberal Feminism has its roots in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Harriet Taylor Mill (1807-1858) (Mukherjee & Ramaswany, 2007). Many writers prior to Wollstonecraft, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) had argued explicitly that men and women by nature are not merely different in kind but different in natural rank with women being physically weaker, intellectually and emotionally (Sha, 2007). Men were said to be more rational, women more emotional and their respective educations should reflect these differences. A few philosophers, such as John Locke (1632-1704) had argued that both sexes should receive the same education and share equal rights and responsibilities with respect to their children.

Liberal feminist theory emphasizes equal individual rights and liberties for women and men and downplaying sexual differences, it has become the most widely accepted social and political philosophy among feminist. Liberal feminist defend the equal rationality of the sexes and emphasize the importance of structuring social, family, gender and sexual roles in ways that promote women’s autonomous self-fulfillment. They emphasize the similarities between men and women rather than the average differences between them, attribute most of the personality and character differences between the sexes to the social construction of gender and tend to promote a single set of role for both men and women.
Liberal feminist theory aims at extending the full range of freedom in a liberal Democratic society to women, criticizing practices that deny women equal protection under the law as well as laws that hitherto discriminate against women. Liberal feminist theory further states that all people both males and females are born equal therefore equal opportunities should be given to them and that women marginalization and subordination arose because of non-recognitions and implementation of liberal feminist theory (Sha, 2007). Liberal feminist further warns that nobody would benefit from existing gender differences because both male and female are important in the development of the society and as such should be treated equally.

The Liberal feminist theory is relevant to this study because it explains and also tries to bridge the gap between male and female which had hitherto existed due to traditional and cultural believes. It emphasizes that women should be given equal opportunities to participate and take leadership roles in organizations as well as the day to day activities of any organization they find themselves as their male counterparts. Moreover, the theory also tries to eradicate sexism and stereotypical view of women and men, and by so doing bridge the gap between men and women in leadership positions in our society and the world at large. The liberal feminist theory is extremely useful in highlighting the historical, International and National dimensions of women’s participation in the workforce and leadership.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is an obvious truism that women have the potential and ability to be leaders and to perform at the highest echelon of public life, the vicious cycle of challenges against their leadership trajectory often constrain their success. Apart from internal factors among themselves, external factors such as social and cultural stereotypes, the problem of balancing reproductive and workplace functions and lack of networking have contributed significantly on constraining their leadership success.

In view of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- That effort should be made to remove undue socio-cultural stereotypes and bias on women leaders which involve not only a transformation in employee’s mindsets but also management practices, processes and organizational culture.

- There is need for women leaders to avoid fear of failure especially those who are starting their leadership trajectory paths, there is need also to discourage self-doubt by commending them to ignore that inner voice that may discourage them from taking tough decisions, speaking up and getting out of their comfort zone.

- That neither trying to act like man guarantee success for a woman leader nor allowing her “feminine” qualities to stand in the way of getting things done is recommended either. The study recommends women leaders to stay focused on department and organizational goals.

- The various laws and legislation which are in existence aimed at empowering women on various aspects of leadership position has failed to address socio-cultural stereotypes of women leadership and as such compromising with access and success of women in leadership opportunities. The study therefore recommends that the existing women empowerment policy should be reviewed so as to reflect the true situation and finally, government should create a women leadership platform network in order to let women share successes and challenges they face in their leadership practice.

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