

Violence against Women Participation in Nigerian Politics and Governance in the Fourth Republic: Issues, Challenges and Way Forward

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Abstract

Women in politics have long faced problems of discrimination, aggression, coercion, and intimidation, yet the concept of violence against women in politics (VAWIP) is relatively nascent, especially in Africa. Suffice it to say that until very recently, a vigorous academic focus has not been given to the phenomenon; its widespread prevalence and obnoxious impacts notwithstanding. In Africa, and indeed in Nigeria, women remain significantly underrepresented at all levels of political decision-making. The underrepresentation of women in politics and governance in Nigeria is caused and supported among others by discrimination, harmful stereotypes, and gender-based violence. A unique form of violence against women i.e. violence against women in politics is one of the major reasons women are discouraged from participating in politics and governance in Nigeria. It is against this background that this study is taken. The paper uses qualitative method and historical approach to analyse her data. The violence against women approach argues that by discriminating against and denying half its population from politics and governance, the Nigerian state has shot itself in the foot. This is because increased women's political participation can, in fundamental ways, result in tangible gains for the democratization process in the country, including greater responsiveness to citizens' needs, increased cooperation across party, religious and ethnic lines, and more sustainable peace. The paper posits that although women's participation in and representation in politics and governance of Nigeria has increased since the return of democratic governance in 1999, there are still many hurdles to cross before women and girls can enjoy unlimited access to politics and

governance in Nigeria which are their civic rights. The paper, therefore, concludes by recommending measures/strategies to combat discrimination and violence against women in politics and governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Discrimination, Gender-based Violence, Violence against Women in Politics (VAWIP), Gender (In) equality, Democratisation Process.

Introduction

With women comprising just 5.2 percent of Heads of Government, 6.6 per cent of Heads of State, 24 per cent of parliament globally, politics is incontestably male-dominated.¹ However, as women today continue to defy gender norms that have traditionally limited their participation in politics and governance of their states, several barriers have equally remained as stumbling blocks to their aspirations. The underrepresentation of women in politics and governance is caused by discrimination, harmful stereotypes, and gender-based violence (GBV). A unique form of violence against women i.e. violence against women in politics (VAWIP) is one of the reasons women are discouraged from participating in politics and governance.

Thus, in Nigeria which is our case study, 24 years of uninterrupted democracy has not placed women on an acceptable level with men, even though the Fourth Republic has witnessed more enthusiasm and participation of women. Currently, there are just 21 female legislatures in both chambers of Nigeria's 469-member National Assembly-13 in the 360-member House of Representatives and 8 in the 109-member Senate. No female Governor in the 36 states of the federation. According to the 2020 global Gender Gap

Index, the ranking and score for 153 countries show that no country has achieved full gender parity in political empowerment.² The report, however, ranks Nigeria poorly at 146th on the political empowerment *sub index list*. Nigeria is also the lowest out of the 37 African countries that made the list.

The reasons for the above, apart from all else, have been blamed on VAWIP. According to Nimota Ibrahim, a former commissioner, and member of the Kwara state House of Assembly, "Sexual harassment from the male folk was part of the challenges confronting female politicians in Nigeria" and " was largely responsible for the drop in the number of women aspiring for elective office across board".³ Similarly, Senator Elendu-Ukeye, who has experienced discrimination, sexual innuendoes, physical threat and insubordination mainly from male colleagues said if VAWIP is not addressed, "the political space for women is going to continue to shrink."⁴ It is against this background that this study examines the phenomenon of VAWIP in Nigeria, its form, and its consequences and recommends measures/strategies for addressing discrimination and VAWIP and governance in Nigeria.

Framework for Analysing VAWIP

Social scientists generally acknowledge the fact that the framework adopted for a research study is as important as the study itself. This is because the choice of frameworks affects the explanation of the event being examined.⁵ For the purpose of this study, the VAWIP approach is adopted. The VAWIP approach starts with women's experiences of abuse in public life and treats VAWIP as a subset of violence against women. The VAWIP approach emphasises at least four important/central tenets: One, women are abused because they are women; Two, they are abused because they are women and in politics. Three, the essence of the abuse is to prevent or limit women's participation in politics and governance; and four, to sustain and reinforce women's subordination and thereby preserve the male dominance of politics and governance.⁶

VAWIP scholars translate the foregoing tenets into politics, thereby offering new insight into politics, and also a new way to understand the obstacles faced by women politicians.⁷ They argued that the common thread linking the abuses and discrimination experienced by politically conscious and active women was their perpetrators' attack on them "because they are women and in politics".⁸ According to VAWIP scholars, the "because they are women and in politics" suggests a motive based on the victim's sex and role: if sexism lays out the gendered roles and traits women "must" have, and misogynists seek to punish women who transgress these boundaries, then the mechanism driving VAWIP are sexism, misogyny or both.⁹

The VAWIP approach emphasises that the gendered distribution of political power and both the conscious and unconscious means of preserving it is violence in itself. The approach characterised VAWIP as an attempt to resist social change and a form of backlash to women's greater inclusion in politics and governance and also an attempt to resist the gains made possible by gender quotas and other mechanisms to empower and increase women's awareness and participation in politics and governance. The VAWIP scholars call attention to attacks that politically aware and active women experienced and those men seem not to experience - such as sexist remarks, sexual abuse/harassment, and rape - to inform stakeholders that women maybe uniquely victimised because their political participation threatens hegemonic men's political dominance.

VAWIP in Nigeria: Issues, Forms, and Challenges

Although women in politics have long faced problems of discrimination, aggression, coercion, and intimidation, the concept of VAWIP is relatively nascent, especially in Africa and Nigeria. Suffice it to say that until very recently, a vigorous academic focus has not been given to the phenomenon, its widespread prevalence and obnoxious impact

notwithstanding. The problem, aside from all else, may be due to the underreporting of VAWIP, which made it difficult for researchers to access data. Before diving into the main issues and challenges of VAWIP, we present some clarifications on concepts used in the study.

For the Purpose of this study, "women in politics" (WIP) in Nigeria includes all women involved in Nigeria's political activities, including those elected at the local government, state, and national (federal) levels, members and candidates of political parties, government officials at the local government, state, and national (federal) and international levels, civil servants, ministers, Ambassadors/ High Commissioners and other positions in the diplomatic service. For the definition of VAWIP, this study adopts the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) definition:

Violence against women in political life is any act of, or threat of, gender based violence resulting in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering to women, that prevents them from exercising and realizing their political rights, whether in public or private spaces, including the right to vote and hold public office, to vote in secret and to publicly campaign, to associate and assemble, and to enjoy freedom of opinion and expression. Such violence can be perpetrated by a family member, community member and or by the state.¹⁰

It should be emphasized that VAWIP differs from other forms of violence because it is intended to control or restrict women's participation in politics and governance. And unlike other forms of political violence, it is usually carried out by political opponents. VAWIP perpetrators may also include a woman's own family and friends. Additionally, media outlets can also promote VAWIP by disseminating unfriendly violent messages about WIP.¹¹

It should be pointed out here that this study does not claim that every violent act committed against a female political actor constitutes VAWIP or deny that female politicians may also commit such acts against men or other women. The main objective of this paper was to examine the main issue related to the motive behind the violence that is, whether it seeks to send a message to women and the society that the individual victim and womenfolk generally, should not participate in politics and governance of the state. Thus, the concept of VAWIP does not encompass all acts of violence experienced by female political actors but rather aggression, intimidation, coercion, and discrimination experienced "because they are women and in politics" so as to discourage them and other women from partaking in the political process and decision-making. According to Safir and Alam special report on VAWIP in Nigeria, "violence can take many forms including psychological threats, sexual harassment and abuse, and physical abuse".¹² In what follows, we examine the various forms of VAWIP as experienced by women political actors in Nigeria.

Physical Violence

Physical violence generally involves/includes any violent act that results in bodily harm. It is the intentional use of physical force with the potential to cause physical harm. In politics, it includes using force as retaliation, including slapping, pulling, pushing, inflicting bodily injury, assault with a weapon, and similar instances.¹³ For VAWIP scholars, physical violence includes "assassination, kidnapping, beatings - often with the intent to force women to resign or withdraw from political life".¹⁴ Too numerous instances of physical violence have been recorded against WIP in Nigeria that listing them here will be superfluous. The peak of physical violence, (i.e assassination) in November 2022 of Victoria Chintex, woman leader of Labour Party in Kaura Local Government Area of Kaduna State in the build-up to the 2023 general election needs pointing out, however.¹⁵

Psychological Violence

Psychological violence in politics involves hostile behaviour and abuse intended to cause fear and/or emotional damage. Examples are: all gestures, acts, speech, writing, or images that damage the psychological integrity of a person or group of people and that serve to weaken or hurt the person psychologically as well as to subjugate or control them. For WIP, according to the National Democratic Institute,

Psychological violence includes verbal abuse such as insulting but also a specific type of hidden abuse such as ignoring, isolating, withholding information, denying attention, and threatening women in politics. Such violence can range from subtle comments related to women's competencies or physical appearances or to a wide spectrum of behaviours such as the psychological phenomenon of gas-lighting, withholding information, conducting smear campaigns, shaming, labeling as aggressive for behaviours which would be seen as energetic if a man engages in them; blackmailing; minimizing the importance of women's opinion or initiatives; exclusion from decision making; ignoring or speaking over; ascribing guilt and shame, or blaming for even banal problems; linking a woman's success with an influential man (e.g. father, husband, lover).¹⁸

Instances of psychological violence also abound everywhere in the political space in Nigeria and mentioning them one by one will amount to a waste of time.

Sexual Violence

According to the *African Parliamentary Union Issues Brief* sexual violence is "any act of violence of a sexual nature perpetrated on another person without their consent including sexual harassment and other unwanted sexual acts such as physical contact, advances, sexual remarks or requests for sex."¹⁹ This type of violence also

encompasses requests for sexual favours, sexual assault and rape". The issue of sexual violence is equally very rampant in the political space in Nigeria that we need not belabour it. However, the words of Nimota Ibrahim are instructive here: "sexual harassment from the male folk was part of the challenge confronting female politicians in Nigeria ...and was largely responsible for the drop in the number of women aspiring for elective office across board".²⁰

Economic Violence

According to the NDI, economic violence "includes the systematic denial of resources to women for election activities, or restricting women's access to resources that are available to men or expecting women to be financially stronger than men before contesting in elections" (Emphasis added).²¹ The political space in Nigeria is structured in such a way that only the financially strong candidates or candidates with financially strong backers can compete. The situation is such that only a few women can compete since the majority cannot afford the kind of money that is required. Most worrisome is the fact that the few women that possess the financial strength to compete are expected to be richer than the men they are running against. According to Dr. Sarah Jibril, former presidential candidate, "financial strength has become a hindrance for women politicians". She noted unequivocally that "women are expected to do more to prove their worth. If a woman wants to contest election, she must be exceedingly rich and even richer than the men she will be contesting against".²²

Internet (Online) Violence

Access to the internet, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, according to the *Paradigm Initiative Policy Brief*, means unlocking access to vast economic and social opportunities that abound online.²³ Suffice it to say that the Internet is an effective tool that women can use in politics and in public life to increase their visibility, disseminate their ideas, and interact with the public.²⁴ However, the Internet can also be used to commit VAWIP: "as the world moves online, much of

the violence women and girls experience offline has moved online".²⁵ The Association for Progressive Communication (APC) defines online gender based violence as "acts that are committed, abetted or aggravated in part or fully, by the use of information technologies (ICTs), such as mobile phones, the Internet, social media platforms and email". Online VAWIP can take various forms, including sexual harassment online, cyberstalking, doxing, online trolling, targeted hate speech, identity theft, etc.

However, unlike what is expected from a largely misogynistic society like Nigeria, WIP in Nigeria has received lesser online violence compared to its western counterparts. According to the Heinrich Boll Stiftung Report, the Nigerian online space is kind to women politicians: "The real misogyny is outside social media...the larger voting masses are not on social media".²⁶ The foregoing should not be interpreted to mean that WIP in Nigeria does not experience online violence; they do. The position is that compared to their counterparts in the developed world, their case is lesser.

Consequences of VAWIP in Nigeria

VAWIP is a very serious problem with consequences that affect all aspects of women's life on one hand and society at large on the other. Suffice it to say that threatening one woman to stop her from participating in politics and governance can discourage other women from engaging in politics and governance as well thereby undermining both their rights and reinforcing women's political exclusion more broadly.²⁷ In sum, according to the NDI it "seeks to send a message to society that women as a group should not participate in politics".²⁸

What the foregoing simply means is that VAWIP seeks to make politics remain a men's affair. Little wonders then that the political office space in Nigeria has been overwhelmingly dominated by men (as the figures provided earlier have shown). Angela Mureli, the programme analyst of UN Women said: "For starters, Nigeria has almost the lowest representation for women in Sub-

Saharan Africa and in fact the world. So, for the giant of Africa, it is quite worrisome that half of the populations are notably represented by people who look like them in spaces of power."²⁹

The Way Forward

Having examined the issues, challenges, and consequences of VAWIP in Nigeria, the question is what is the way forward? The paper analysed various measures and strategies for addressing VAWIP in Nigeria as follows:

Awareness Creation

Creating awareness about the evils of VAWIP is the first step in curbing its existence. This awareness should begin first among the women folk. This is because even among women politicians who have experienced VAWIP some see their experiences as a "normal part of life".³⁰ And for those who are aware that VAWIP is wrong, some are reluctant to talk about it or seek redress or justice. The fear of being blamed, having the truth of their allegations questioned, being accused of provoking the harassment or violence themselves, fear of retaliation, fear of being seen to be disloyal and or harming the image of their political parties, are some of the reasons victims of VAWIP would not report the issue.

Awareness about VAWIP should not be limited to women alone; men should equally intervene to curb such occurrences. As with some women victims, some men did not see VAWIP as abnormal in politics. Hence, there is the need to raise the awareness of the problem. APU remarked that

if they are trained to understand and recognise these inappropriate acts, men will become more aware of abusive behaviour. They will be able to react immediately, support the victims, talk to their male colleagues who are perpetrators of violence and report them if necessary, break the silence, take a stand against such behavior in parliament and in the media and

thus set an example of good behaviour.³¹

The media should be actively involved in the campaign/awareness on VAWIP. The media, including newspapers, magazines, radio, television, internet, etc influences the behaviour, attitudes, and worldviews of both the politicians and the masses generally. Hence, news coverage of VAWIP as obnoxious and as a human rights violation - not as something to be expected in politics - is important in the fight against VAWIP. Different media outlets or organisations, including the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission, can be encouraged to develop codes of ethics regarding VAWIP that would emphasis the need to portray women's participation in politics and governance fairly and comprehensively without stereotypes.

Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) i.e. the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should be encouraged to promote awareness about VAWIP. EMBs are the principal state actors in electoral administration whose decisions and actions determine the credibility and security of elections. They are also central to voter education programmes and awareness. By integrating VAWIP into these programmes, INEC can help raise national awareness and dialogue on the issue while also assuring/encouraging women of their safety to vote freely and safely. Professor Attahiru Jega, former INEC chairman buttressed this that

In INEC we believe very strongly that whatever we do, we have to factor the protection and defense of women.³²

The onus lies on INEC to match the assuring words with concrete actions and also ensure that information about VAWIP and respective mitigation measures/strategies are integrated into training programmes for its staff (permanent and ad-hoc) and electoral stakeholders. The information should equally be extended to women at the grassroots, so

they are aware of it and its response mechanisms.

For the awareness to be successful, NGOs (especially women-focused ones), civil society groups, and international stakeholders should be involved and collaborate. For instance, the UN Women in 2019 organised a series of workshops on VAWIP in Nigeria in partnership with the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, trade unionists, youths, religious and traditional leaders, and other stakeholders.³³ Such efforts are needed and should be encouraged.

Criminalise VAWIP

To combat VAWIP, there is the need to have strong and enforceable laws to address all forms of VAWIP, including gender based violence/harassment in the workplace and at home. Laws are needed to provide protection and support to victims, create an avenue for reporting violence, and hold perpetrators accountable.³⁴ The law on VAWIP in Nigeria and their enforcement seems weak and therefore need to be further strengthened to ensure victims get justice and perpetrators are sanctioned or convicted. Nigeria can take a clue from Tunisia which passed a national law to combat VAWIP in 2017 and became the only country in Africa whose domestic law on combating violence against women provides specific sanctions for it.³⁵ Article 3 of the law defines political violence as "any act or conduct that has the purpose or results in depriving or impeding women; partisan, political or associative activities, or any woman's fundamental rights or freedoms". Article 18 stipulates that " any person who commits political violence shall be fined one thousand dinars", and that "in the event of recurrence of the offence, the punishment shall be a term of six months imprisonment".³⁶

Whether new laws on VAWIP are promulgated or existing ones strengthened, there is a need to strengthen or create a conducive atmosphere for security agents to combat VAWIP. Police and other security forces are very critical in the prevention and response to VAWIP given their duty to ensure

public safety in political and electoral processes. They, therefore, deserve to be well-motivated and trained. Nowadays, security personnel needs to be trained in the digital environment to advise and assist women who are subject to intimidation, threats of sexual violence or death, harassment or insults and so on via mobile messaging or social media.

The Nigerian experience has shown that security agents can sometimes be the perpetrators of VAW whom they are supposed to protect. It is, therefore, essential that security agents be trained and provided with the required tools to respond to VAWIP irrespective of whether the acts were committed by its members or any highly placed individual in accordance with national laws as well as international human rights and gender equality standards. Security agents, especially the police, need to set up a gender Focal Point within it to encourage women to report cases of VAWIP safely and to ensure that cases are acted upon promptly and thoroughly such that perpetrators (including where applicable security agents) are prosecuted and adequately sanctioned.

Conclusion

This study emphasised that Women in Politics (WIP) have long been subjected to the problems of discrimination, aggression, coercion, and intimidation but the concept of VAWIP is relatively nascent, especially in Nigeria and Africa. The study emphasised also that women have remained significantly underrepresented at all levels of political decision-making in Nigeria; constituting less than 10 per cent despite making up almost 50 per cent of the country's population. This study placed the underrepresentation of women in politics and governance of Nigeria on VAWIP, aside from other factors. The study argues that the existence of VAWIP is not just denying female politicians a level playing ground but is also preventing those women or young girls who have the intention of participating in politics and governance of Nigeria to jettison their ambitions. This study, therefore, agrees with Soudani and Abbes when they posit that

The acts of violence that target women active in civil and political life have a dissuasive effect for any female citizen who has the will or intention to become a public figure or a politically active person. The cynical argument that politics is brutal and that criticism and attack are inevitable for women seeking to compete with men in a traditionally male-dominated sphere simply normalises such violence against women in the field of politics.

Our position is that if women cannot fully participate in the political life of their country, then democracy and by extension national development are at risk. Suffice it to say that by denying and discriminating against half its population from politics and governance, the Nigerian state has shot itself in the foot. This is because increased women's participation in and representation in politics and governance of Nigeria can, in fundamental ways, result in tangible gains for the democratisation process in the country, including greater responsiveness to citizens' needs, increased cooperation along party, religious and ethnic lines, and more sustainable peace. While there is much to praise about Nigeria's relatively free, fair, and peaceful 2023 elections, women's ability to exercise political voice beyond this milestone as citizens, public servants, and leaders will be the ultimate test of whether real progress has been made.

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