

OVERCOMING STIGMA AND STEREOTYPES: CHALLENGES TO NNEWI WOMEN'S ROLES IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

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Abstract

In Nigeria's socio-political landscape, gender roles have been historically confined by pervasive stigma and stereotypes rooted in traditional norms. The dynamic interplay of culture, gender, and politics in Nnewi, a prominent town in Anambra State, has attracted the interest of scholars of various endeavours. Despite facing significant challenges, including traditional structures that encourage patriarchy, women issues, and limited access to education and resources, Nnewi women are redefining their roles through grassroots mobilisation, advocacy, and policy engagement. The paper explores the multifaceted challenges faced by women in Nnewi as they navigate contemporary political landscapes. Despite significant social and economic advancements, Nnewi women encounter systemic obstacles that hinder their full participation in politics. Furthermore, the often underappreciated contributions of women in local governance and decision-making processes are discussed, highlighting the disparity between their potential influence and actual representation. The study employs qualitative methods, including interviews and focus group discussions with local women leaders, activists, and community members, to gain insights into their experiences and perceptions of political participation. Primary, secondary and tertiary sources of data were used in analysing historical events. Ultimately, this research aims to shed light on the unique barriers Nnewi women face and propose actionable strategies to empower them, fostering a more inclusive political environment that recognises and amplifies their voices in shaping community governance and policy. It calls for a re-evaluation of gender roles and stereotypes in the political context, emphasising the need for continued advocacy and institutional support to sustain and further the progress achieved by Nnewi women.

Keywords: Women, Stigma, Stereotypes, Politics, Roles, Challenges, Election, Position.

Introduction

In present contemporary societies, the role of women in politics has become a pivotal topic of discourse, particularly in regions where cultural norms have historically suppressed female participation in governance. Nnewi, a vibrant town in Anambra State, Nigeria, is emblematic of the struggles women face in these arenas, grappling with deeply entrenched stigma and stereotypes that undermine their potential. The intersection of gender and politics in Nnewi presents a complex landscape where women aspire to redefine their roles and assert their agency. A study conducted by the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC)¹ highlighted that traditional ideologies can significantly constrain women's involvement in political processes, perpetuating a narrative that views men as more suited to leadership roles. However, the challenge is multi-faceted and requires a concerted effort to dismantle these deeply rooted barriers and create an environment that fosters inclusivity and equality for women in politics.

Although the major stigma surrounding women in politics often manifests through cultural beliefs that suggest political engagement is an inherently male domain, Nnewi women however, frequently encounter resistance not only from male counterparts but also from women within their communities, where stereotypes portray them to have jealous and competitive inclinations towards one another.² According to Abigail Irele³, societal perceptions have historically skewed women's capabilities, rendering their contributions to community governance and political life invisible or undervalued. As such, addressing these stereotypes is imperative for fostering an inclusive political environment, as women's perspectives and experiences are invaluable to comprehensive governance, enabling the representation of diverse interests and concerns within communal decision-making processes. In confronting these challenges head-on, Nnewi women have begun to rise against stereotypes and redefine their political landscape. Empowerment initiatives, such as women's groups and community-based organisations, have been instrumental in educating women about their rights and the importance of their voices in civic engagement.⁴ The emergence of female political leaders from Nnewi is an encouraging sign that change is possible. This paper however, will examine the challenges faced by Nnewi women in contemporary politics, take a look at the profile of some Nnewi female politicians, and suggest possible ways to overcome these societal barriers. Through examining these issues, this discussion will emphasise the urgent need for a rethinking of women's roles in politics to pave the way for a more equitable future.

Mitigating Factors to Nnewi Women's Participation in Politics

Women's participation and access to various political power structures vary across countries of the world. Various surveys and analyses have been drawn to ascertain women's political representation in government seats/positions. The progressive results, gathered so far, however, leave a lot more to be desired. Recent pieces of literature on Nigerian women and politics have made attempts to identify various factors that affect women's political participation. On this note, it is now widely acknowledged that despite membership of Nigeria in the Bureau of the Executive Board of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (EGEEW); women in Nigeria still constitute a short-changed group in the political sphere, most especially in respect to their few representations in elective and appointive positions.⁵ This constitutes an important social and political issue which has attracted the attention of International Organisation like the United Nations (UN).

The UN, through its various organs and agencies, has recommended concrete measures, designed to alleviate the problems of low representation of women in political offices; and liberate and integrate them into the mainstream of national development efforts. Though successive governments have taken both constitutional and administrative actions, calculated to resolve some of the problems facing women in politics (such as the signing of the UN treaty that compelled political parties to remove all barriers, directly or indirectly, that discriminated against women's participation in politics),⁶ the picture of the contemporary reality of women's political status in Nnewi can perhaps be fully appreciated against this backdrop; as there still exist socio-political cum economic challenges facing these women's political ambitions. These challenges include poor education, poverty, the masculine nature of politics, the godfather phenomenon, the pull-down syndrome associated with women, election rigging, etcetera. Amongst other things, some of them will be examined below.

Women Issues

More often than not, Nnewi women are seen as the architects of their own political misfortune. The pull-down syndrome associated with some women, which often arises from their jealous inclination is considered one of the challenges to women's ambitions in Nigerian politics.⁷ Women are said to be their own worst enemies. An article by Women in Higher Education pointed out that relationships are central to women's lives and as such, they expect their relationships to be on a level playing field. So when something – anything affects this balance, such as promotion amongst others, it raises feelings of insecurity. The article attempted to throw some insight into the reasons why upon entering a gathering, some women may quickly, but silently, do an assessment and tend to judge themselves on looks, age and sex appeal.⁸ Sophia A. Nelson in *The Woman Code*⁹ traced the origin of this anomaly to childhood. She posits that women from the time they are little girls were taught to compete with one another to be prettier, smarter, or better than others. Thus, they often grow up with the view of other women as threats and would engage in whatever means possible just to excel at all cost; even if it means working against other women's ambitions.¹⁰ On this note, a good example could be seen in Nnewi during the personality clash that occurred between Ifeoma Ofodeme and Calister Nkiru Adimachukwu, during the 2014 Local Government Elections in Nnewi-North; which saw Adimachukwu kick against the election of Ofodeme as Chairman Nnewi-North Local Government Area as a result of interest.¹¹ This goes a long way to buttress the fact that women are their own enemies and perhaps explains why despite women being said to constitute over sixty percent (60%) of Nigerian electorates, less than twenty percent of political offices are held by women¹², as they would rather opt to vote for the male counterparts than their fellow women contestants owing to these jealous and competitive inclinations. This has been one of the major factors leading to Nnewi women's low representation in politics, especially in elective political positions.

Insufficient Education

Education is considered the basis for the promotion and improvement of the state of women. The United Nations posits that education is the basic tool that should be given to women in order to fulfil their role as full members of society. Though the nationalists saw education as the instrument to lift the nation out of its primitive morass; to enlighten the masses for democratic participation in national politics, and an avenue for the nation to participate in international affairs, fewer Nigerian women had access to education than the men. Throughout the 1900s, female education lagged behind that of males in much respect. For instance, by 1920, the ratio of boys to girls in secondary school was 35:1 and by 1965, the total number of girls in Southern Nigeria who enrolled into school stood at 23,143 as against 157,746 boys.¹³ The same has been established in the tertiary level of education, as the female enrolment rate remains below those of the males.¹⁴ J.F.A. Ajayi¹⁵ posits that this anomaly no doubt, can be attributed among other things, to the European notions of gender on education during the colonial period which emphasized mostly the education of the male child, apparently influencing Igbo parents attitude's to education, resulting in their preference to send their male children to school while the female children were encouraged to marry early.

On this note, the gender inequality in education that existed during the 1900s is considered one of the reasons for low Nnewi female representation in politics since these elites turned out as politicians of post-independent Nigeria. As in many parts of the country, western education through the institutionalized school was introduced to Igboland by Christian Missionaries. With their focus on the male folk, it was thus the men who became powerful and important in the society as native court clerks, interpreters, etcetera. Ochieze relayed a story of an Igbo woman who on her death bed had envied these fortunate educated males stating that if she ever had the opportunity to come back to life, she would opt to become a man, go to school, in other to become a native court clerk and be feared/revered by all. This goes a long way to illustrate the disparity created between the female and male folk at the time. This colonial emphasis on male education went a long way to influence the cultural inclination of families in Igboland which came to attach more importance to the male children, who are considered future heirs, while the women were expected to focus on getting married.

As Uchendu¹⁶ observes, women in traditional Igbo society were trained to be obedient to their parents and husbands; their lifestyle was thus socio-culturally predetermined and any departure from it was considered unbecoming. Adeboye¹⁷ pointed out that most Igbo parents believe that it is the male child that will occupy and carry along the family name while others think that the boy child is more useful to the father, thus the emphasis on the education of the male child. So when a child is born, the first question asked tends to be if it's a boy or a girl. With this perception and attitude, most parents in Nnewi hesitate in sending their female children to school believing she would be eventually married out of the family. Moreover, some Igbo believe that if the girl does not go to school, she still has the opportunity of being trained by her husband while some have nursed the fear that too much education of the girl child could jeopardize her chances of getting married.¹⁸ So the female child is encouraged to marry early. To buttress this point, S.T. Anuma in "Education as a Forward-Looking Strategy for the Nigerian Women",¹⁹ reported that recent data in the Southeastern States like Enugu, Ebonyi and Anambra, attributes over sixty percent (60%) of female school dropouts in secondary schools to early marriage. A.B.C. Ugwu²⁰ affirms that in Igboland in general, there is often considerable pressure upon a girl to get married and assume the role of wife/mother which is considered the actualization of her womanhood, without which she stands the risk of being labelled an "immoral loose woman". Okafor and Lloakasy²¹ had corroborated this view when they observed that a woman's level of dignity and acceptability is a function of her marriage status and it is culturally a great misfortune for a woman to remain single in Igboland.²² The forgoing is the basis for the poor education of Nnewi women which has turned out to be a challenging factor to the actualization of their political ambitions as records have shown that the majority of women from Nnewi who engage in politics are illiterates.²³ Even though these notions are gradually being swept under the bus with the impressive increase in female population in primary, secondary and tertiary education in recent times;²⁴ it will, however, take a while before these young women can grow up to become future female politicians.

Gender Role Dispensation

In Nnewi, descriptions of everyday life reveal the family as an institution that enacts gendered divisions of labour as it relegates most women to the private sphere; while most men are relegated to the public sphere. A study of the implication of these distinctions indicates that as long as women's natural social

role consists in reproducing a private sphere of family, motherhood/home keeping, their access to the public sphere of work, decision making/law-making, knowledge/culture production and politics will remain minimal.²⁵ The study recognises this to be another militating factor against Nnewi female politicians which has resulted in their low representation in politically appointive and elective positions.

Poverty as a Constraining Factor

Women in Nnewi have found it difficult to compete favourably with their male counterparts within the Nigerian political sphere as a result of poverty. The 1999 Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) Report, based on the analysis of a series of consumer expenditure surveys for poverty in Nigeria over the sixteen years 1980-1996, showed that female-headed households are over-represented amongst the poorest.²⁶ In 2012, the FOS,(now the National Bureau for Statistics) posited that over the years, abject and protracted poverty has been a common feature of Nigerian society, as sixty-five percent (65%) of Nigerians live below the poverty line, with women constituting the majority.²⁷ On this note, evidence has shown that most Nnewi women politicians are poor, illiterates who perceive politics as a means to acquire financial fiat.²⁸ Thus, extensive poverty which manifests in the form of illiteracy and financial constraints act as major barriers to Nnewi women's active participation in politics. In a country like Nigeria, with a pathetic culture of the high cost of election forms, campaigns and what have you, poor female politicians often experience challenges in furthering their political ambitions as they do not have the financial capacity to do so. Ofordeme, had lamented the fact that she wasted virtually all her savings as a banker in an election campaign during her contest as a Local Government Chairman of Nnewi-North L.G.A.; which summed up in millions of naira²⁹ – an amount which most Nnewi women would consider quite exorbitant to spend on politics. Of course, one could find very little number of women in Nnewi who may have such an amount or be willing to spare such a huge sum of money to spend on politics. This on its own has served as a major challenge to women's political ambition.

The Negative Godfather Concept

In the history of Nigeria, the end in politics is mostly for personal aggrandizement or a group's self-interest. To this end, every ethnic group or political zone have political figures who champion the group or self-interest in the struggle for power in Nigeria. The victory or failure of a political party/candidate depends on the influence of these political figures who are known as godfathers. The godfather's influences could come in various forms; either through his financial support or through his links with the necessary political authorities. Historical evidence has proved that godfatherism has become a part and parcel of Anambra politics. Adeniyi attempts to trace the origin of this phenomenon to the era of Gen. Sani Abacha, when his friend, Arthur Eze, ensured he had a say on which military officer would govern Anambra state. And when the transition programme began in 1998 according to him, everybody knew who was going to be the governor of the State.³⁰ Wole Adeyemo³¹ in affirmation had observed that it was the time of Sir Emeka Offor (political godfather) and Chinwoke Mbadinuju (political godson) of Anambra State in 1999 under the platform of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). In 2003, it was the era of Chief Chris Uba (Political godfather) and Dr. Chris Ngige (political godson) under the PDP.³² In 2003 and 2010 respectively, under the platform of the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) party, it was the time of Emeka Ojukwu (political godfather) and Peter Obi (political godson).³³ In 2014, it was the time of Peter Obi (political godfather) and Willie Obiano (political godson) of the APGA party.³⁴

Therefore, the history of modern politics in Anambra reflects the marriage of politics and godfatherism. As Ray Ekpu³⁵ rightly observed, elections in Nigeria are a contest of godfathers, guts, blood and fears; a contest serviced with sacks of naira, private armies(thugs), hired crowds and *babalawos* (Native doctors). Luke Ugweye³⁶ posits that in order to be elected into any political position in Nigeria (especially in recent times), one knows that it is a waste, to campaign for the votes of the electorates which would not matter at the end of the exercise. He maintained that all one needs is simply the anointing of one wealthy man who has close links with Aso Rock.³⁷ To a large extent, this has remained a cog in the wheel of Nnewi women's political ambitions; as this phenomenon has served as a turn-off for some women in politics since it invariably makes them vulnerable to prostitution in a bid to achieve their fiats in politics. They are thus seen shifting their allegiance from their husbands to their godfathers. Ifeyinwa Emejulu had opined that godfatherism is an indispensable factor in Nigerian politics which often affects women's political ambitions and participation. Buttressing this, she gave a logical explanation stating that, if female politicians conformed to this system of turning to godfathers in order to achieve their political ambitions, it would mean them seeking the support and attention of men who are not their husbands; and the Igbo society frowns at this.³⁸ This probably explains why most ambitious women in politics are regarded as "political harlots"³⁹ – a term most women would find quite dehumanising and discouraging. This defamation of character often discourages most Nnewi women from politics. Unfortunately, the Nigerian government have done little or nothing to eradicate this trait (Godfatherism) as most of the people at the helm of affairs of government are either products of the said system, perpetrators or beneficiaries.⁴⁰

The Masculine Nature of Politics.

Ochieze⁴¹ posits that in most parts of Igboland, men are seen as superior to women, as women are often referred to as the weaker sex. Leadership from this perspective is seen as man's affair, thus, giving room for what has been termed as the masculine nature of politics. According to him, in this system, men tend to dominate the political game, formulate the rules of the political arena and define the standard for evaluation. The existence of this male-dominated model results in either women's outright rejection of politics or the female style of politics, since by nature they are on the soft side of life. In affirmation, Ofordeme observes that some Nnewi women often shy away from partisan politics because the system is built on male hegemony in party hierarchies.⁴² As Ochieze pointed out, most political parties have no clear-cut policy for women either in their constitutions or party manifestos; this makes them often pay lip services to the support of women for elective and appointive positions. The domineering positions assumed by the male folk in partisan politics have no doubt, made ridicule of Section 191(b) of the Beijing Declaration which requires political parties to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women in the electioneering processes⁴³ in compliance with Article 7 of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).⁴⁴ It is based on the foregoing that Ralph Madubuike had concluded that the Beijing Conference has little or no impact on Nnewi female politicians as they are still used as puns in the Nigerian political spheres. According to him, the majority of Nnewi women continue to play cheer-leading roles for the male political actors.⁴⁵

Besides, the crisis and violence associated with Nigerian politics which has made political thuggery, kidnapping, snatching of ballot boxes, destruction of public properties and what have you, the *modus*

operandi for achieving political goals, seem to discourage most women from politics as most of these activities are carried out by males. Perhaps, an example could be drawn from the crisis of confidence between the then Governor of Anambra, Dr. Chris Ngige (political godson) and Chris Ubah (political godfather) in 2003. Both individuals at the time had engaged in a hyperactive power tussle. The battle for supremacy which lasted for about 3 years of Ngige's stay in office as Governor (29 May, 2003 – 17 March 2006) came in different dimensions such as political intrigues, mudslinging, propaganda, destruction of public properties,⁴⁶ death threats and kidnapping. These anomalies which are often carried out by mostly males as earlier established, have been recognised as one of the reasons that discourage Nnewi women from politics. Another example could be seen in 2009 when Lady Ofordeme confessed to getting several threatening messages owing to her political ambitions to run for the Nnewi North Local Government Chairmanship Elections. In 2010, her husband was kidnapped in a bid to discourage her from the politics of Nnewi.⁴⁷ These political woes no doubt, often discourage the majority of women from vying for political positions as they are more often than not, on the soft side by nature.

Election Rigging

One of the most important features of a democratic government is its ability to organise a credible periodic election. According to M. Abdul Alim,⁴⁸ the conduct of free and fair elections is at the heart of the democratic process. But when an election is often rigged or conducted in a non-inclusive way, it leads to a loss of confidence in the results and escalates structural disparities and inequalities which stimulates violence. This is of course a turn-off for most Nnewi women towards politics. Uduaghan⁴⁹ describes a credible election as one that is conducted following due process, accepted by the people as representing their choice, respected by political contestants as a valid representation of their true strength and resistant to obnoxious interferences. This implies that the choice of the people must be upheld through the ballots they cast. In Nigeria however, rather than credible elections, what is obtained is election rigging which is multifaceted. As Ofordeme rightly observed, elections in Nigeria are often a show of strength where politicians throw in every strategy legally or illegally in order to achieve their fiat in politics, keeping in mind that the end justifies the means so long as they aren't caught.⁵⁰

Conclusively, the masculine nature of politics, women's issues, election rigging, poor education and the godfather phenomenon amongst others are the various factors that militate against Nnewi women's participation in politics. What is not certain is the degree to which these factors could negatively influence each woman's political interest and ambition. However, a general assessment on the number of Nnewi women who have made it to elective and appointive political positions; based on their evidential poor representation, has portrayed that to a large extent, these factors have stood in the way of women's improved political participation. Thus, in order to achieve a more gender-balanced representation in the politics of Nigeria, these factors must be dealt with decisively.

Overcoming Stigma and Stereotypes: Profile of Some Nnewi Female Politicians

The general expression "Zoon Politikon", used by Aristotle to describe the natural political inclination of man⁵¹ never excluded the women on a general note. In recent times, Nnewi women have displayed natural inclinations towards politics through their various roles and contributions which the study argues has brought about socio-political development in the region. The efforts of various successive Nigerian

governments to institutionalize democracy have yielded impressive results as more Nnewi women participated in Nigerian politics within the period of discourse through the electoral voting process, mobilization and counselling of voters, party campaigns, vying for political positions amongst others, in recent years than ever before. Ukaogo, affirms that women have developed diverse methods and strategies of survival⁵² in any political scenario they find themselves in. Although very few were seen occupying elective and appointed positions, however a few of them have graced these political seats and have contributed immensely to nation-building either as governors, Deputy Governors, Ministers, Commissioners, lawmakers and even as women leaders of various political platforms. Below are the profiles of some of these female politicians from Nnewi.

1. Etiaba Virginia Ngozi

Age: 80+ years.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Etiaba is a teacher by profession whose passion for education and sheer desire to make a change in her society has become a wide knowledge and inspiration to many. She is a native of Ezekwuabor Otolu Nnewi and was raised by her Uncle, Chief Pius Ejimbe until she got married to the Late Bennet Etiaba of Umudim Nnewi. For 35 years, she worked as a teacher and headed several Schools in Kafanchan, Aba, Port Harcourt and Nnewi and eventually retired from the service of the Anambra State Government in 1991. In that same year, she founded the Bennet Etiaba Memorial Schools, Nnewi of which she was the Proprietress.⁵³ She has been an active member of the All Progressive Grand Alliance Party (APGA) since its inception in 2003. She became the running mate of Mr. Peter Obi of the APGA party during the 2003 Anambra State Gubernatorial elections and was sworn in as the Deputy Governor of Anambra State on the 17th day of March 2006. However, with the impeachment of Governor Peter Obi by the Anambra State Legislature on November 2, 2006, over allegations of misconduct; she was constitutionally declared the Executive Governor of Anambra State. She thus became the first female governor in Nigeria in 2006.⁵⁴ On February 9, 2007 Etiaba handed power back to Obi after the Court of Appeal had nullified Obi's removal⁵⁵ and went back to her former position as the Deputy Governor of Anambra State until March 16, 2010.⁵⁶

2. Ifeoma Ndefo

Age: 57 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Ifeoma is a Businesswoman married into the Ndefo family in Otolu Nnewi. She was one of the women who developed an interest in politics after she witnessed the remarkable contributions fellow women like Christy Ikedife, Ngozi Okoli, Christy Ofordile, etcetera had made towards political development in Nnewi, under the platform of the People's Democratic Party in 1999; most especially in the area of mobilisation of voters and party campaigns.⁵⁷ Inspired by these women, she thus decided to follow suit and became a well-known political activist in Nnewi for the All Progressive Grand Alliance Party. She had begun her political journey in the APGA Party after its inception in 2003. In 2011 under the same APGA party platform, she was appointed Counsellor in Otolu Ward I.⁵⁸

3. Calista Nkiru Mmilioma Adimachukwu

Age: 60+ years.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Calista was born in Port Harcourt, River State on July 7, 1963 into the family of Chief Joseph and Mrs. Grace Kamemena of Ihembosi in Ekwusigo L.G.A, Anambra State. She started her educational career at Ogboli Primary School Onitsha and Abbot Girl's Secondary School Ihiala and passed out in 1985. She later got admitted to Anambra State College of Education Awka, where she obtained her NCE in Business Studies/Government in 1988. She went further to obtain a Higher National Diploma (HND) from Federal Polytechnic Oko in 1996. In the year 2001 she got her Post Graduate Diploma (PGD) from the University of Calabar and her Masters Degree in Business Administration from the University of Calabar in 2002. Calister is a well-known businesswoman/politician, who is married to Dim Fidelis O. Adimachukwu.⁵⁹ Mmilioma (as she is fondly known) has been a prominent and active member of the APGA party since 2003. She was once appointed the Local Government Chairman, of Nnewi-North Local Government Area from March 2007 to September 2007.⁶⁰ From 2007-2011, she was also appointed a Board Member of Anambra State Universal Basic Education (ASUBE). In 2014, she was elected the woman leader Ohaneze Ndi Igbo (An Igbo political platform) nationwide.⁶¹ She is currently a party member of the People's Democratic Party (PDP).

4. Ngozi Ubah

Age: 57 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Ngozi Ubah is a teacher by profession and has been in this field for over 15 years before she started developing an interest in politics. Her interest in politics reached its peak in 2003 when she eventually joined the APGA Party.⁶² She is currently one of the Anambra State executive members of the All Progressive Grand Alliance. She was once appointed supervisor for Education/Social Welfare of Nnewi-North, 2013-2014 during the tenure of the then Governor Peter Obi.⁶³ In 2014, she contested for Umudim Ward I Counsellorship. She also contested for the seat of a representative in the State Assembly in 2015 but lost to Hon. Chris Azubogu.⁶⁴

5. Blessing Ngozi Ulasi

Age: 60 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Blessing Ngozi Ulasi, before her journey into politics in 2003 was a lawyer by profession who acquired her degree from a London-based University. She had delved into politics with the sole aim of imparting change and bringing about development in the politics of Nnewi.⁶⁵ She became a member of the Progressive People's Alliance at its inception in 2003. In 2013 she emerged winner as the flag bearer of the Progressive People's Alliance Party (PPA) and thus contested as one of the candidates for the Anambra Gubernatorial election.⁶⁶ She however lost to the current governor of the state, Gov. Willie Obiano.

6. Christy Ikedife

Age: 65 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Christy is a businesswoman who got married to Chief Dr. Dozie Ikedife in the late 1900s. She is a Nurse by profession and had worked in her husband's hospital until she contested and won a political seat in 1997 as Counsellor Otolu Ward II. She has been a well-recognised activist in partisan politics in Nnewi within the period under review. In 1999, she became the first PDP Local Government State Woman Leader in Nnewi North after PDP was formed.⁶⁷ According to her, in 2000, she was appointed a member of Anambra State Local Government Service Commission as a Commissioner for two tenures. The intermittent interruptions in the Ngige (PDP) and Peter Obi's (APGA) governorship tenures made her remain in that position for over eleven years.⁶⁸ In 2009, she became a member of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) which later amalgamated with other parties to form the present All Progressive Congress (APC) in 2013. From 2014 till date, she has been the Senatorial Woman Leader, Anambra South zone.⁶⁹

7. Felicia Ngwube

Age: 45 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Felicia Ngwube⁷⁰ is a businesswoman who picked an interest in politics in 2001 and joined the People's Democratic Party. Since then, she has been an active member of Anambra State PDP. In 2008, she became one of the candidates representing Nnewi North Constituency who contested for the PDP ticket for Anambra State House of Assembly with Hon. J.C Okeke but lost out of the race.⁷¹

8. Ngozi Okoli

Age: 50 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Ngozi Okoli is a businesswoman who claims to have been in politics for over 35 years. She is a well-known political activist who has contributed to politics through various group/organisational platforms; some of which she created to carry out political missions. For example, she founded the *Otu Ifunanya* (an Indigenous traditional dance group) in 1999. She also founded the *Umuada Anaedo* (a solely Nnewi female Indigenous traditional group) and Action Movement (the traditional group which involves both males and females); both formed in 2013 for political missions.⁷² From 1999-2003, Mrs. Okoli was a well-known member of the People's Democratic Party. In 2003, she joined the APGA party and was made the APGA woman leader of Nnewi-North from thence till 2010. She became a member of the Progressive People's Alliance in 2010 during the election campaign of Emeka Etiaba. She is currently the woman leader Ohaneze Ndi Igbo, Nnewi-North unit.⁷³

9. Christy Ofodile

Age: 57 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Christy is a housewife who was married to the Ofodile family in the early 1980s. She has been an active member of the People's Democratic Party since its inception. She was one of the women who stood in support of Hon. Christy Ikedife during her contest as Counsellor Otolo Ward II in 1997. Her efforts paid off with the emergence of Hon. Ikedife as the winner of the aforementioned ward. However, in 1999, she joined the Anambra People's Forum – an opposition faction of the PDP and in that same year, she was made the Local Government Woman Leader.⁷⁴

10. Charity Arinzechi

Age: 50 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Charity Arinzechi⁷⁵ is a trader by profession. She is one of the women who got inspired to join politics in the early 2000s when the likes of Virgy Etiaba and Christy Ikedife to mention a few, became prominent figures in politics. She has been a well-known member of the APGA party since its inception in 2003. According to historical records, she was made the APGA woman leader of Otolo Ward II in 2010.⁷⁶

11. Ebele Atueyi

Age: 52 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Ebele Atueyi is a housewife. She had picked interest in politics in 2006 when she joined the APGA Party. She has since been an active member of the party and was most recognised for her campaign contributions in the gubernatorial elections of 2010 in Anambra State. She was seen rallying alongside the then APGA flag bearer and incumbent governor, Peter Obi, sensitizing the masses on the benefits of re-electing him. Her efforts eventually paid off when Peter won the elections. In the same year, she was made the woman leader of Otolo Ward III under the platform of the APGA party.⁷⁷

12. Ngozi Okonkwo

Age: 48 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Ngozi Okonkwo obtained her Bachelor of Law Degree from the University of Nigeria, Enugu in 1997. She is an Associate Member of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators, United Kingdom and Associate Member of the Chartered Institute of Taxation, Nigeria.⁷⁸ Ngozi is an active and well known member of the APGA party. In 2015, she was appointed the Ag. Accountant General, Anambra State.⁷⁹

13. May Anadu

Age: 65 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

May Anadu is a retired teacher who began her political journey in 2003 after she joined the People's Democratic Party. She was one of the women in Nnewi at the time who had expressed her unflinching support for the then-PDP flag bearer in the person of Chris Nwabueze Ngige. She was also one of the PDP delegates who were assigned to monitor the federal general elections of 2007 in Uruagu Ward II. Lady Anadu was once appointed the Supervisor for Education in Nnewi-North by the State Government from 2011-2013.⁸⁰

14. Carol Agwuncha

Age: 47 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Carol Agwuncha is a businesswoman and a well-known active member of the APGA party at both state and local government levels. In 2010, she joined Ebele Atueyi and Christy Arinzechi, amongst others in the mobilization of voters for election. She also sensitized the masses on the need to re-elect the then-incumbent governor of Anambra State, during the Anambra State gubernatorial elections.⁸¹ In April 2013, she was elected the Treasurer of APGA, Anambra chapter. This was during the era of Governor Peter Obi of Anambra State.⁸²

15. Amaka Nzewi

Age: 55 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Amaka Nzewi⁸³ is a housewife who has always had an interest in politics even before the re-installment of a democratic government in Nigeria in 1999. According to her, she had developed more interest in politics after Christy Ikedife in 1997 under the platform of the People's Democratic Party had contested as a Local Government Counsellor Otolo Ward II and won. Since then, she has become an active member of the People's Democratic Party. In 2010, she was made the woman leader of Otolo Ward I.⁸⁴

16. Augustina Okoye

Age: 55 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Augustina Okoye is also a trader by occupation. According to her, her interest in politics when she saw women like Chisty Ikedife contest and win Local Government elections under the platform of the PDP.⁸⁵ She became a member of the People's Democratic Party and has been an active member of the Party since 1999. She became the woman leader of Umudim Ward II from 2002 – 2010 under the platform of her party – PDP.⁸⁶

17. Ifeoma Ofordeme

Age: 57 years+.

State: Anambra State.

Local Government Area: Nnewi-North

Ifeoma Ofordeme was initially a Banker who due to her interest in politics had resigned from this profession in 2004. She however started her political journey in January 2008 by joining the APGA party⁸⁷. Ofordeme became an active member of the APGA party and was known for her financial support and activism during election campaigns of the party, especially during the 2010 gubernatorial elections in Anambra State.⁸⁸ In 2013, she joined the Labour Party (LP). Under this Political Platform, she contested for the seat of Nnewi North Local Government Chairman. This election was unfortunately declared inconclusive by the Anambra State Independent Electoral Commission (ANSIEC) despite rumours of her victory.⁸⁹

The above profile is not an all-entailing list of Nnewi women in politics, nor is it a list of the wealthy, powerful and/or successful women in the politics of Nnewi town from 1999 - 2015. It is rather a record of a few number of Nnewi female politicians from all backgrounds, (rich and poor) who have through resilience, character, endurance and integrity fought their way through the politics of Nigeria. By contributing their quota to the socio-political development of Nnewi, even in the face of outright opposition and challenges, these women have carved a niche for themselves in the history of Nnewi in particular, Anambra State and Nigeria in general.

Addressing Systemic Barriers

To reframe the narrative surrounding women in Nnewi politics, it is essential to consider various strategies that can facilitate the inclusion and empowerment of women. Education, liberal gender role dispensation, eradication of the negative godfather concept, building support networks, and reorientation/sensitisation programmes tailored specifically for women, especially, the ones aspiring to enter politics are foundational steps that can significantly alter the current landscape.

Adaptation of a flexible gender role dispensation: There is a need for a total reorientation of gender roles in Nigeria. It has been observed that these gender roles are usually culturally specific and more often than not, the family, which is the smallest political unit of every society is one institution that enacts these gender roles. The government must engage in public sensitisation of families to adopt a more liberal gender role dispensation and behavioural patterns that are not seen as inimical to the realisation of women's full potential as expressed in the United Nations Declaration of March as International Women's Day.⁹⁰

It is recommended that the government should engage in the sensitization of the masses on the need to achieve a balanced representation in roles by both sexes. There is a need for engagement through the media in advocacy journalism to assist in setting the agenda and buttressing its importance. These media outlets with the support of government parastatals should not only put these gender-disaggregated data out there for mass enlightenment (which is expected to create thought-provoking questions in the mind of

most individuals), rather, they should also throw light into the dangers of its continued practice and project a possible technique to bring about the required change in the region.

Building Support Networks and Mentorship

Creating robust networks and mentorship opportunities is vital for the political advancement of women. Support networks can provide women with the necessary resources, both emotionally and financially, to navigate the political landscape. Mentoring programmes that pair aspiring female politicians with experienced women in politics can also enable knowledge transfer, boosting confidence and competence among new entrants.

In addition, female politicians can advocate for policies that promote women's participation in politics more broadly. By forming coalitions and alliances with progressive male allies, Nnewi women can amplify their voices and push for legislative changes that undercut existing barriers.

Education of the Girl Child: Education according to most scholars forms the basis of modern civilised society anchored on development and progress while a society without education remains primitive and backward. Education is the oil that lubricates the thinking, attitude, behaviour, appearance and character of a person and by extension society.⁹¹ E.K. Aggrey made a very significant impression on education when he stated that the surest way to keep a society down is to educate the men and neglect the women. According to him, if you educate a man, you simply educate an individual but if you educate a woman, you educate a whole nation because he believes these women play crucial roles in the family and are often responsible for the socialisation of children, providing key support for socio-economic cum political development.⁹² In the course of this research, the study recognises poor education as one of the factors that work against female political ambitions resulting in their low representation in politically appointed and elected offices, thus it recommends that Indigenous, governmental and non-governmental organisations should key into creating this awareness on the importance of the education of the girl-child.

Various policy measures should also be put in place by the federal government to encourage this trend. Notions that portray that a woman's role starts from the kitchen and ends in 'the other room' should be discarded through effective sensitization and reorientation. It is also recommended that the government should engage in the implementation of free and compulsory education for every child up to the tertiary level, as human capacity building has proved the most effective tool for a nation's development course. Parents should be motivated to train their children (male and female) through financial assistance from governmental and non-governmental organisations. Adult education for both sexes emphasizing the scientific, technical and skill acquisition fields should not elude this capacity-building course. Furthermore, government should ban the idea of hawking during school hours by school-aged children. This in itself becomes necessary because about 80% of hawkers⁹³ in most eastern towns in Nigeria and Nnewi, in particular, are school-aged girls. Cheaper and affordable schools should be created to help these children attend school instead of taking part in such odd jobs to support themselves and their families.

Eradication of the Negative Godfather Concept: The origin of the godfather concept is distinctly religious. As infant baptism took hold in early Christianity, there was need for someone to step in as a sponsor and possibly provide the required confession of faith before baptism. In addition to sponsoring the child's christening, the godfather was charged with the duty of overseeing the child's spiritual and

moral instruction/upbringing.⁹⁴ Sadly, the concept of godfather today in politics has taken a rather different turn. In fact, the word brings back memories of popular movies such as *The Last Don*, (a movie that displays naked power in a highly competitive criminal world)⁹⁵; or *The Godfather*, a similar film where Italian mob bosses were seen calling in hits on rival mob families or snitches within their own ranks.⁹⁶ These godfathers are known for granting favours and running criminal organisations. It has become widely acknowledged that contemporary politics in Nigeria has become aligned with this negative concept.

Ochieze⁹⁷ lamented the fact that these political godfathers are powerful individuals who determine who, what, when and how things are running in the corridors of power as most of them operate as mafias, displaying similar violent scheming and aggressive attributes, garnished with manipulative skills in having their ways by all means in every situation. As most women are considered rather soft in nature and non-violent in actions, the study thus recommends that the various governmental and non-governmental organisations in the country both at the federal, state and local government levels should establish and implement certain policy measures aimed at reducing the high cost of the electioneering campaign as this has formed a certain frosty aura between big wigs who control power or power-shift as well as the economy (often to their selfish interests) and the patriotic commoners who aspire to build the superstructure aimed at attaining greener pastures.

It is essential to establish a law that will set a reasonable limit to the amount of cash an individual can spend in a single election cycle. This is expected to make electioneering more affordable by a vision-minded commoner and totally eradicate the concept of godfatherism in the politics of Nigeria as there will be little or no need for sponsorship or support. This will help to curb situations where most women (especially the married ones) tend to shift their allegiance/support from that of their husbands to political godfathers in a bid to achieve their fiat in politics.

Reorientation of the female child: As already established in the study, women are said to be their own worst enemies. Sophia A. Nelson,⁹⁸ traces this anomaly to most children's moral upbringing where they are often taught to compete with one another for virtually everything in life. In her words, she stated thus "From the time we're little girls, we're taught to compete, 'I need to be prettier, taller, and smarter; my hair needs to be straighter, curlier, whatever it is. I need to get the better-looking guy. I need to always be better because we are taught to come from a place of lack as women.'" This notion has played out in the political life of women generally. One of the shameful reasons why women even after being said to constitute about 60% of electorates in the country, and even vying for a good number of political seats, there still exists a problem of low representation in political offices.

In light of this, the study recommends total reorientation of the girl child. She needs to be taught that she does not need to like every other girl she comes across, nor like her choices, however she could show solidarity when it is required. These children need to be taught from the onset to eschew their differences with one another and desist from shaming or terrorising themselves. They need to understand the need to raise each other up and show empathy either in private or public. Through these teachings, most of them will be made to understand the benefits of treating one another with dignity and respect.

The paper believes that the implementation of these recommendations will go a long way in addressing these challenges faced by Nnewi women in politics and probably yield impressive results with respect to increased female representation in political offices in the near future.

Conclusion

The paper observes that the prospects for women in politics remain bright, the imbalance in gender representation with respect to appointment and elective positions, to a large extent reduced the political roles played by these Nnewi women in contemporary times. The study traces this anomaly to the colonial era when women were conformed to playing subordinate roles to men by the imperial lords who preferred direct dealings with the men. As a result, women were sidelined from politics through education. This was evident in the fact that as of 1920 the ratio of boys to girls in secondary school stood at 35:1.⁹⁹ And since education became a prerequisite for political power, Nnewi women's roles in the political happenings of the areas found themselves in were somewhat limited. In recent times, various governmental and non-governmental organisations such as the United Nations, International Women Tribute Centre, Amnesty International, and National governments amongst others, have worked towards pioneering the gender perspective into the politics of various nation-states through diverse policy measures and conventions, sensitising the need for the adaptation of the Human Rights Act as well as creating awareness on the need for education of the female child. This in itself has resulted in an impressive increase in the female population in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions over time. However, it will take some time before these girls can grow into women and fill these political gaps.

The study resolves that the sensitisation has not only yielded results in the educational sphere but also in the political arena as there has been a drastic change in Nnewi women's attitudes towards politics. Today, these women are seen in large number engaging in socio-political actions such as peacekeeping, knowledge and moral impart, policy-making, mobilisation of voters, vying for political positions, voting into power certain representatives who would govern them, monitoring election and census processes in the country. All these have contributed to the socio-political development of Nnewi, Anambra State and Nigeria at large. Despite Nnewi women's participation in these political exercises, there is still the issue of low representation in government elective position. These factors have resulted in the representational imbalance of the country begetting diverse political chaos/dissatisfaction. However, the work strongly posits that the eradication of the godfather concept in politics, education and reorientation of the female child, building support networks/mentorships, and the adaptation of a liberal gender role dispensation will address the underrepresentation of women in politics. Until both gender interests are well represented in politics, political peace and harmony which is essential for accelerated growth/development will remain far-fetched.

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⁹⁷ Christopher Ochieze, “The Role of Women in the Politics of Southeast Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria, 1999-2007, 68.

⁹⁸ Sofia A. Nelson, *The Woman Code: 20 Powerful Keys to Unlock Your Life*, United States, Brilliance Audio, 2014.

⁹⁹ Nina Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women Political Activities in Southern Nigeria 1990-1965*, Berkeley, Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1982, 35.