

Women Issues and Equality in the Public Sphere: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

It is often taken for granted that women are becoming increasingly influential in contemporary society. This position is apparently supported by the visibility of women in the academic, corporate and political arena. However, this paper contends however that the seemingly rise of the influence of women is only apparent and cosmetic . This is so because the rise in the number of women operating in the traditionally male dominated public sphere does not necessarily translate to decisive influence on the content, process and outcome of public policy. This paper seeks to illuminate the juxtaposition of women's growing visibility with their systemic powerlessness in Nigeria by critically examining the role that gender plays in the deliberations and dialogues in the public sphere. Taking its departure from Nancy Fraser and other feminist critique of Habermas' emphasis on the role of rationality as the *modus operandi* in the public sphere, the paper demonstrates how the operational norm of the latter excludes women from exerting the level of control that correspond to their improved presence in the public space. Beyond this, certain powerful cultural barriers which define social expectation about the proper role of women in the public space are highlighted. In conclusion, the paper argues that the prominence given to women issues and the deliberate policy to increase the number of women in the public realm does not necessarily translate to women empowerment. Rather, it is in keeping with the current vogue in western societies.

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Introduction

The question of equality as a concept is one whose importance and sensitivity cannot be overlooked. This concept permeates the very core of social relations and interactions. The clamour for equality is based on the simple assumption that it is a right which must be pursued by all. This assumption has influenced decisions at the governmental level and other spheres of human interaction.

While some argue that “all men are created equal”, others have speculated on the degrees of equality. They argue that some are more equal than others. They base their arguments on the theory of natural selection where life experiences and other factors militate against the equality of all and in speculating about the equality of more than others, women unfortunately are usually categorised under the “other” label. It is against this backdrop that many feminists and womanists (as some African Female scholars prefer to see themselves) have advocated for the inclusions and consideration of women in the scheme of things. They argue that only then can meaningful development take place. It is a fact that the history is replete with innumerable problems that has bedevilled the human race. These problems do have variety of effects which range from social disharmony, religious intolerance, terrorism, political gangsterism to economic instability. These hindrances to peace and stability in social relations which have socio-cultural cum religious shades are further heightened by the patriarchal system that pervades most societies in the world. This has led to sexual categorisation and consequently gender discrimination. Rather than having social relations which is hinged upon personal and individual abilities, there exists a socio-cultural construct of the sexes. Roles are imposed on individuals according to societal expectations. Consequent upon this attitude are practices of sexual discrimination, molestation and maltreatment of the female sex. This has affected the way women are perceived. The woman is looked at as the “weaker sex” and lacking an independent mind. If she is wronged or suffers humiliation scorn or embarrassment, the man has to speak for her and in her defence. This scenario gave birth to what is known today as the feminist movement.

Patricia Spencer Faunce defines feminism as an advocacy system for women. She explains that feminism

Insists that women must have personal autonomy and both the freedom to direct and the responsibility for directing all areas of their lives... feminism fosters pride in being female, emphasizes the commonality of the female experience across cultural and socio-economic lines, and develops a sense of community among women. It holds that

the roles are open to all people and that every woman is entitled to develop her potential fully.¹ (1985:)

According to a World Bank report, there has been increase in women involvement in the corporate, educational and political domains. It notes that:

Progress has been varied in increasing female school enrolment. Countries such as Botswana, Rwanda, and South Africa have met enrolment targets.” It however points out that out of 22 countries worldwide that are unlikely to reach the enrolment target, 16 are from sub Saharan Africa, in which Nigeria belongs to. It observes also that “the region's female primary school completion rate, among the lowest in the developing world, is 57%-10% points below that of boys.

In Nigeria, just as records show that women have suffered series of oppression stemming from patriarchal norms that protect the interest of the man against the woman, so also Nigerian history is replete with examples of women who have been able to rise above the prevalent oppressive situations to make a mark in the sands of time. Ezeigbo opines that: “today, women are found in virtually all professions in the country, though the number of those involved is relatively small when compared with the large population of women”.

The list includes the likes of Queen Amina of Zaria, to Queen Moremi, Madam Tinubu, Funmilayo Kuti to the present Professor Dora Akunyuli (a Pharmacist, former Director for the national agency for drug and current Minister for Information) Senator Abike Dabiri, (journalist/ Politician, Chris Anyawu (Journalist and business magnate) Margaret Icheen (Politician) and Ibukun Awaosike (Business tycoon).

The context here is that, women have become increasingly visible. More women in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular are found in the academic, corporate and political circles.

The bone of contention in this paper is that the seeming increase in the visibility of women in public places does not necessarily imply that women are more influential in policy making than before. This paper therefore seeks to illuminate the juxtapositions of women's growing visibility with their systemic powerlessness in third world countries like Nigeria by critically examining the role that gender plays in the deliberations and contemplations in

¹ Faunce, Patricia Spencer. 1990. “Self-Care and Wellness of Feminist Therapists.” In *Feminist Ethics in Psychotherapy*, edited by Hannah Lerman and Natalie Porter, 123–130. Springer Publishing Co.

the public sphere. In order to provide an informed analysis of the problem that has been highlighted above, we shall quickly examine the habermasian conceptualisation of the public sphere and other conceptual issues.

Conceptual Issues

In discussing Jurgen Habermas conceptualisation of the public sphere, it is important to understand that his intention is to defend modernity against post modernity's belief in truth and rationality when they posit that truth is perspectival. Habermas defence to the postmodernist position is that he argues that any idea that is a product of rational dialogue is a reflection of the consensus reached and therefore cannot be relative. The public sphere is one of the sites through which ideas of truth can be generated. Habermas therefore conceives of the public sphere as the public space where deliberations and discussions take place and where public opinion is developed for the purpose of influencing governmental policies. In his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 1962, Habermas explains that:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as sphere of private people come together as public, they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against public authorities themselves, to engage in debate over the general rules governing the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour. The medium of political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of reason.²

What is implicit in Habermas' explanation is the state- society and the private-public dichotomies. By the public, Habermas means the spheres where decisions and actions are taken which have consequences on the general persons. The private sphere on the other hand refers to the domestic realm. It is important to note here that the conventional understanding of the private sphere is that it is apolitical while public sphere has political connotations.

According to Habermas, the public sphere mediates between the private sphere and the “sphere of public authority”. He sees the private sphere as comprising. Both the expanding domain of economic relations and the intimate sphere of personal relations which became increasingly disentangled from economic activity and became firmly attached to the institution of conjugal family³

². Habermas, J. (1962) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT press.

³. Irele, D. *The Public Sphere and Democracy*. Lecture delivered at the Arts Faculty, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, July 15, 1998.

On the other hand, the “sphere of public authority” refers to public sphere and it is a site that permits individuals in the society to participate in the process of public policy making. To the degree that the public sphere provides a space of discourse, a site of deliberation from which public opinion could be transmitted; it becomes one of the avenues by which citizens can influence government and its policies. In other words, the public sphere then becomes an instrument for expanding political participation and deepening democracy. It is assumed that one can measure the level of democracy by looking at the height and depth of the public sphere. *The critical state of a democracy can be measured by taking the pulse of the life of its political public sphere.*⁴

From this perspective, democracy must have a vibrant public sphere whose activities influence government policies. It is interesting that currently, in the information age, ICTs have given us tools that make it possible for all to participate in the public sphere. Print media, electronic media and the internet have expanded the frontiers of the public space.

According to Habermas, the *modus operandi* of the public space was rational argumentation and disputation and through these positions are arrived at which influence governmental actions. Habermas analysis of the public sphere has come under series of attacks especially from feminist thinkers. Susan Moller Okin⁵ for example argues that the political straddles both the public and private spaces because both are pervaded by power relations.

We shall first take an analytical look at the public and private divide and Habermas qualification of each as being political and apolitical respectively. Okin challenged the neatly demarcated Habermasian realms of the public and private by demonstrating Habermas' adoption of this conventional demarcation of social relations is problematic:

to regard the private as non-political, she claims is to fail to recognise the pervasive linkages between the public and the private realms, and the role that government plays in framing the roles that govern the private realm.⁶

Okin therefore insists that what happens in the private sphere is essentially political because it has political ramifications and implications. She lists four reasons why this is so:

⁴. Habermas, J. (1962) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT press.

⁵. Okin, Susan Moller. "The Public/Private Dichotomy." In *Contemporary Political Theory: A Reader*, edited by Catherine Farelly, 185-94. Sage, 2004.

⁶. Okin, Susan Moller. "The Public/Private Dichotomy." In *Contemporary Political Theory: A Reader*, edited by Catherine Farelly, 185-94. Sage, 2004.

Firstly, Okin sees power as the defining character of the political and she maintains that such also exists within the family. This goes in line with Foucault's position that power is pervasive everywhere. Secondly, the life and norms that do govern the private sphere are consequences of political decisions made in the public sphere. Thirdly, it is a fact that most of our socialisation takes place in the domestic world and as such since the domestic world is characterised by women who are majorly oppressed, this has far reaching effect in the public sphere. To therefore argue that government cannot legislate what takes place in the domestic realm is to short change the women.

Fourthly, the roles, expectations and divisions of labour within most families raise psychological barriers against women in all other sphere.

With these observations, Okin successfully erases the divide between the public and private by advocating that the public sphere should also include the private since both are pervaded by power relations.

Benhabib supports Okin by arguing that Habermas separation of issues that affect women such as reproduction, nurture and care for the young, the sick and elderly from the public sphere, “endorses the conventional social-spatial divisions which remain the source of structural oppression and gender inequality”. He says that in the public sphere, issues for discussion should be subject to negotiations. To quote Benhabib,

All struggles against oppression in the modern world begin by redefining what had previously considered as private, non-public issues as matters of public concern, as issues of justice, as sites of power which needs discursive legitimation.⁷ (p.87)

Nancy Fraser (2001) equally argues for example that these boundaries

....directs attention away from the fact that the household, like the paid workplace, is a site of labor, albeit of unremunerated and often unrecognised labor. Likewise, it does not make visible the fact that in the paid workplace, as in the household, women are assigned to , indeed ghettoized in, distinctively feminine, service-oriented and often sexualised occupations. Finally, it fails to focalize the fact that in both spheres women are subordinated to men.⁸ (p.107)

She argues therefore that these boundaries are socially constructed and as such are open to reconstruction and deconstruction.

^{7.} Benhabib, Seyla. "Models of Public Space." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, 73-98. MIT Press, 1992.

^{8.} Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56-80

Habermas had insisted that the *modus operandi* of the communicative discourse which takes place in the public sphere was rational argumentation and disputation. This has been considered to be highly inaccurate. For feminists, persuasion and rhetoric is an equally important element of political communication. For Habermas there to insist on purely rational discursive norm is to exclude from the public sphere “those who do not possess the cultural capital required to mobilize the rationalist discursive forum”. Little wonder then that Fraser regards rational deliberations as a mask for oppression and domination. Thus, for the public sphere to be meaningful, appealing to any egalitarian or liberal minded thinker, it has to be more representative and more inclusive in a way that opinions of diverse strata or groups in the society are taken into consideration. Also, public sphere does not operate in vacuum. It should also be the one that recognises and encourages other modes of communication such as rhetoric etc. The socio-cultural milieu in which it is situated profoundly affects its nature and character. Demographic factors are also important. Here, the population of the literate versus the illiterate are key factors.

The Nigerian Experience

The Nigerian scene reveals that in spite of the seeming involvement of a larger population in the corridors of power, the indices point to the fact that women are still subjugated and relegated. Beyond the Habermasian divide and the feminists' critiques of the Habermas public sphere, there are other factors that do contribute to these states of affairs.

Other factors that are responsible for the perpetuation of the domination of women are patriarchy and religion. Nigeria is a patriarchal society and this has greatly influenced the way women are perceived and treated. It is generally argued by the male folk that because of her sex, the woman reasons differently. Thus, laws are made to suit the man and he executes them to his own advantage.

In fact, statistics show that despite the constitution stating clearly that nothing excludes the participation of women in politics but then the same constitutions' emphasis on registration of political parties and party membership as the only means of political ascendancy has created more barriers on the Nigerian woman. Ndubuisi⁹ observes that women are denied meaningful participation within the existing political parties. She says that women's roles are majorly restricted to praise singing fund raising party supporting mobilising and dancing. In 2003, political space was more liberalised in the sense that more women were

⁹ Ndubuisi, O. B. (2006). "The Impact of Culture, Religion, and Tradition on Women in Nigeria." In *Affirming Diversity: Women Making a Difference*, San Antonio, Texas, USA.

encouraged to join political parties. However, there was no marked improvement as statistics shown below:

Elective Office	1999	2003
Senate	3.7%	3.7%
Presidency	0.0%	0.0%
House of Representatives	3.33%	5.8%

The above as captured by Ndubuisi affirms Ezeigbo's position that the population of women in politics is quite few comparable to the large population of women in Nigeria. This insignificant difference as shown in the above table points to the fact that patriarchal system is firmly entrenched in Nigeria's cultural fabric. In another work (Agboro 2001) it has been argued that the question of population is as a result of the high rate of illiteracy that is prevalent in the continent and not because of any chauvinistic policy that has been set up in the various African countries. What in effect is being argued here is that a large proportion of women are not literate. No matter how loud the voices of the literate few are, their voices shall be drowned by the majority who are content with their basic survival needs being met.

Religion has had its adverse effects on the Nigerian woman. The Islamic religion for example forbids the woman from being heard. If she is seen, she must be dressed in a particular way. In Abuja for example, certain mode of dressing was prescribed for the Muslim women that work in the civil service. They were not permitted to wear trousers to the work place. Despite concrete facts that show that teenage child bearing can dangerously affect the health both to mother and the baby, a former governor of Zamfara state married a thirteen-year-old girl. When protests came from the Nigerian public as well as from women rights groups, he argued that he had done no wrong since Islam permits such acts.

Ndubuisi agrees with the above point when she notes that religion and culture have helped to entrench patriarchal norms that set the parameters for

women's structural unequal position in families and markets by condoning gender-differential terms in inheritance rights and legal adulthood; by tacitly condoning domestic and sexual violence and sanctioning differential wages for equal or comparable work¹⁰

Statistics also reveal that despite the fact that women's employment rights are protected

¹⁰. Ndubuisi, O. B. (2006). "The Impact of Culture, Religion, and Tradition on Women in Nigeria." In *Affirming Diversity: Women Making a Difference*, San Antonio, Texas, USA.

under the Nigeria Labour Act, many women find themselves discriminated against. Married women are less likely to get employed simply because they are easily prone to getting pregnant and as such the corporate fabric cannot afford to be interrupted with issues of maternity leaves and domestic affairs. They are consequently left with farming and petty trading which do not have meaningful monetary value. And to end this section in the words of Ndubuisi,

the reality is that Nigerian women are far from enjoying equal rights in the labour market. Women are mainly involved in arduous manual task in farming and food processing. They do not have access to land but can only use the land at the benevolence of their husbands and brothers. They have limited access to agricultural inputs. They do not have access to credit facilities and they are rarely engaged in the production and marketing of lucrative cash crops.¹¹

The Way Forward

In the light of the problems that we have identified above, it is obvious that the inferior position into which women are relegated in Nigeria shall persist until the education of the women folk is taken seriously. This paper therefore recommends a massive, sustained and integrated educational program to empower the most vulnerable sections of the Nigerian populace especially women. This becomes an imperative in order to weaken the hold of patriarchal structures which remain at the core of women oppression in Nigeria. Education is also important because it provides the teeming population of the Nigerian women with the intellectual resources for effective participation in the public sphere. Until these suggestions highlighted above are given due consideration, the visibility of women in the Public sphere shall remain a mere window dressing, a flash in the pan that is incapable of addressing the power imbalances between men and women in the Nigerian society.

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¹¹. Ndubuisi, O. B. (2006). "The Impact of Culture, Religion, and Tradition on Women in Nigeria." In *Affirming Diversity: Women Making a Difference*, San Antonio, Texas, USA.

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