

The Jonathan Administration and Women Empowerment in Nigeria: The Scorecard and the Challenges

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Abstract

It has been demonstrated in this paper that for the Jonathan administration in Nigeria, it has been a scenario of the obscurity of accolades. Nevertheless, one particular area of statecraft in which the Jonathan administration has been highly rated is the issue of women empowerment. Despite the accolades that the otherwise highly criticized Jonathan administration has won on women empowerment, there are still some grey areas. Findings of the study truly indicate that the scorecard of the Jonathan administration in what is currently regarded as women empowerment in Nigeria is highly commendable. However, the challenges of the administration in the area of instituting women empowerment in Nigeria are threefold. They critically border on unmasking women empowerment of its elitist, benevolent and political undertones.

Keywords: Jonathan Administration, Women Empowerment, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The Jonathan administration in Nigeria is headed by Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan who became Vice-President of Nigeria on May 29, 2007. He became Acting President on February 9, 2010 following the terminal ailment of the then President Umaru Yar'Adua, until the unfortunate demise of Yar'Adua on May 5, 2010. Jonathan was subsequently sworn-in on May 6, 2010, as the President, Commander - in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. On January 14, 2011, following a Presidential Election, Jonathan was overwhelmingly elected as the President of Nigeria for a four years' tenure that terminates in 2015 (FRN, 2012). For the Jonathan administration in Nigeria however, it has been a scenario of the obscurity of accolades. President Jonathan has accordingly described himself as the world's most criticised President (Chiedozie, 2012). Nevertheless, one particular area of statecraft in which the Jonathan administration has been highly rated is the issue of women empowerment (Idonor, 2011; Iheuwa, 2013). Women empowerment is indisputably critical to national development. It has accordingly remained topical in developmental discourses in the Nigerian state (Adefarasin, 1987; Lasiele, 1999; Okafor and Abdulazeez, 2007; Fapohunda, 2011; Luka, 2011; Adebawale, 2012; Ezegbe and Akuebue, 2012). In any case, despite the accolades that the otherwise highly criticized Jonathan administration has won on women empowerment, there are still some grey areas on the scorecard of the administration, over this subject matter. The general objective of this study therefore is to critically examine the performance of the Jonathan administration on the issue of women empowerment, by presenting the scorecard and identifying the challenges. The specific objectives of the study are to (i) critically examine the scorecard of the Jonathan administration on women empowerment in Nigeria (ii) highlight the surrounding challenges and (iii) make recommendations on how to deepen the impact of women empowerment efforts in Nigeria, under the Jonathan administration.

The theoretical framework of the study is the empowerment theory framework. In this regard, citing Rappaport (1981) and Rappaport (1984), Perkins and Zimmerman (1995:569) have posited that empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies to social policy and social change. Empowerment theory research and intervention therefore link individual well-being with the larger social and political environment (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995:569). Therefore, Rappaport (1987), cited in Perkins and Zimmerman (1995:570) simply sees empowerment as a process by which people gain control over their lives and democratic participation in the life of their community. Women empowerment is not different. It is essentially about the process by which people (women) gain control over their lives and over democratic participation in the life of their community (Idike, 2014).

On women empowerment as concept, Onah (2011:132) cites two other sources as follows: Women empowerment is the development of the mental and physical capacity, power or skills in women, for them to operate meaningfully in their social milieu, thereby experiencing a more favourable level of social recognition and subsequently enhance their economic status (Akomolafe, 2006). Women empowerment is the process through which women, who are currently most discriminated against, achieve gender equity (Mayoux, 2005). It is against this theoretical background that we re-examine the scorecard of the Jonathan administration, in women empowerment in Nigeria.

2. The Scorecard of the Jonathan Administration on Women Empowerment

Iheuwa (2013:1) cited in Idike (2013:3) posits that in the spirit of its expressed policy, in support of 30% Affirmative Action for the benefit of women, the Federal Government under President Jonathan, made conscious and positive efforts to take appropriate measures, to reflect a good percentage of women in governance. For instance, the administration took off in 2011 with the appointment of 13 female Cabinet Ministers, 5 female Special Advisers, 10 female Ambassadors, 16 female Judges of the Court of Appeal; 11 female Permanent Secretaries, 16 female Judges of the Federal High Court, 3 female Judges of the Supreme Court, 6 female Judges of the National Industrial Court; a female Acting President, Court of Appeal and The Chief Justice of the Federation as female. By this, the President has made good his campaign promises by raising the number of women in decision-making positions to an unprecedented level (Iheuwa 2013:1). What is striking, posits Calebs (2014) is that it is under the Jonathan administration that Nigerian women have attained the highest level of participation in the nation's social, political and economic life. President Jonathan's Transformation Agenda contains a National Gender Policy which it mainstreams into all aspects of government planning and development. A major component of that policy is women empowerment in politics. Here, there has been a remarkable success in the creation of awareness on the participation of women in politics. Not only has a Political Trust Fund been established to provide support to women aspirants willing to participate in general elections, a database of women political aspirants has also been created. The implementation of Jonathan's Gender Policy has also resulted in an increase in women's representation in Government, from 10% in 2011, to over 33% in 2013, with the appointment of 13 female Ministers out of 42, representing 31% and 4 Special Advisers out of 18, representing 23%. These appointments have set the stage for the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target number three, on Gender Equity and Women Empowerment (Calebs, 2014).

According to Ajah (2014), Nigerian women have never enjoyed a pride of place like they have done in Jonathan's government. The first government in Nigeria to appoint a woman Chief Justice of Nigeria since independence, first woman Petroleum Minister and too many other firsts attributed to Nigerian women since the country's leadership history. Jonathan's leadership is the most gender sensitive administration so far in the country. It is in his government that the best of Nigerian women in leadership responsibilities has been most showcased even for future administration in the country (Ajah, 2014). Outside politics, two micro-credit schemes have been set up to assist women: (1) the Women Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE) and (2) the Business Development Fund for Women (BUDFOW). The two schemes are revolving facilities with an interest rate of 10%. In addition to these efforts, 77 skills acquisition centres have been constructed and equipped across the country to increase income generation, through job creation, for women, especially at the grassroots level. A recent research, conducted and published in a book, titled Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, Champion for Women, shows that Nigeria was 23rd out of 188 countries studied, in terms of women mobilization, appointment into positions, participation in governance and women empowerment (Calebs, 2014). Justice Zainab Bulkachuwa was also recently appointed the first female President of Nigeria's Court of Appeal (Bamgboye, 2014). Iheuwa (2013) thus concludes that the Jonathan Administration has focused truly on the visibility, genuine empowerment, dignity and participation of women in politics than any time in Nigeria's history and that the Nigerian woman never had it so good. Consequently, women empowerment has taken root in the country. Women now have a place of pride to operate in politics, as they are now sure of appointive positions, where women were completely shut out (Iheuwa, 2013). Under the Jonathan administration in Nigeria therefore, women empowerment possesses immense political undertones. It appears more like the empowerment of the women elite and increasingly, women empowerment is accepted as act of benevolence on the part of the administration, for which women have to remain grateful.

3. Women Empowerment Under the Jonathan Administration in Nigeria: The Challenges

The challenges of women empowerment in Nigeria (under the Jonathan administration) are three-fold. They border on how to unmask women empowerment of its elitist, benevolent and political undertones. For instance, the internationally repulsive kidnap of nearly three hundred teenage school girls from a boarding school in Borno State, North East of Nigeria, by the dreaded Boko Haram insurgents, negates the gains of the Jonathan Administration on women empowerment. It is not the act of the kidnap that is conflictual with the celebrations over women empowerment but the fact that several months after the incident, it is business as usual among the ostensibly empowered women and their political benefactors, while the kidnapped young women remain under the captivity of their abductors. Premium Times (2014) reports that The United States says the Nigerian government should be held responsible for the seeming lack of progress in rescuing the kidnapped teenage girls.

The over 270 girls were kidnapped from the dormitory of the Government Secondary School, Chibok, Borno State, on April 14, by the Boko Haram. Over 50 of them escaped and reunited with their families while 219 are believed to still be with the insurgents. The U.S. is among several Western countries assisting Nigeria in the search for the school girls and the battle against the insurgent Boko Haram, which has killed over 12,000 people since its insurgency began in 2009. Reacting to questions about how useful the collaboration has been, Ambassador Phillip Carter of the U.S. African Command (AFRICOM) said in Ghana, West Africa, that the U.S. government is only assisting the Nigerian government on the kidnap that has sparked protests across the globe. Fundamentally he argued, the question of what the collaboration is achieving, is a question to be posed to the Nigerian government and not AFRICOM (Premium Times, 2014). In other words, the responsibility for freeing the kidnapped young women rests on the shoulders of the Jonathan administration.

Oga (2014) further contends that actually, the high level of insecurity in Nigeria has left many women to become widows prematurely. In the last three or more years, he argues, the activities of the dreaded Boko Haram sect in the northern part of the country has produced more widows than ever imagined. Law enforcement personnel on routine assignments have been killed, while mostly, places of worships are destroyed by suicide bombers, causing numerous death tolls, while many women are left as widows. Ironically, the Federal Government of Nigeria which has the responsibility for reducing the level of insecurity in the country leaves the insecurity issue hardly addressed and as part of its benevolent women-empowerment focus, inaugurates widows empowerment scheme for the widows of the men killed in these crises (The Punch, 2014). Should women empowerment in Nigeria be directed towards a decrease in the level of insecurity that produces more widows or towards state benevolence for the ever increasing number of widows?

According to Adelaja (2014), a woman dies while giving birth in Nigeria every 15 minutes. About 630 women die out of every 100,000 live births in Nigeria, the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world, according to the World Health Organization. The figure is as high as 1,100 in northern Nigeria and rural communities where women are less educated and access to health is even worse. Nigeria is all but certain to default on the 2015 global date for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) part of which requires a significant reduction in maternal deaths. The casualty has grown amid poor funding by the government, lack of trained workforce and lack of access to prompt medical attention (Adelaja, 2014).

Fapohunda (2011:391) sees (women) empowerment as a call to action and it involves a process of fundamental change in quality of life of any material being. It is the ability to effect change and make meaningful choice. It is enabling, permitting, giving people more control over their own lives. Sako (1999), cited in Fapohunda (2011) defines empowerment as the process of strengthening the existing capacities and capabilities of disadvantaged groups in society so as to enable them perform better towards improving themselves, their families and the society as a whole. It involves the provision of enabling environment for their productive and intellectual abilities to be realized. In addition, Ighodalo (1990) also cited in Fapohunda (2011) views women empowerment as a process of enabling women to develop the capacity to actualize their potentials. Women empowerment is not therefore precisely about appointments into state offices. Oyebamji and Aminu-Philip (2012:542) disclose that sixty seven percent (67%) of Nigeria women are illiterate. Thus, women empowerment must also be seen in the context of how this illiteracy level is being reduced, how the girl-child is educated and how she is protected from being kidnapped and how repulsive it appears to the country's leaders when the girl-child is denied the opportunity of improving herself. Women empowerment is strictly about creating the enabling condition for the freedom of the female sex from all forms of bondage and deprivation.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Findings of this study truly indicate that the scorecard of the Jonathan administration in what is currently regarded as women empowerment in Nigeria is highly commendable. However, the challenges of the administration in the area of fundamentally instituting women empowerment in Nigeria are threefold and they critically border on unmasking women empowerment of its elitist, benevolent and political undertones and taking the women empowerment policies of the administration to the areas of the society from where such policies would generate multiplier effects. In this regard it is recommended in this study as follows:

The Jonathan administration should revitalize the bring back our girls campaign which has generated immense international interest, under its women empowerment agenda and in words and action prove to the international community that the Nigerian state cares deeply about its womenfolk. The genuine concern for the plight of the female gender must begin with the teenage girl who in no distant time becomes the full fledged woman. As a mark of concern for the welfare and freedom of the Nigerian teenage girl and womenfolk, the Jonathan administration must be able to precisely indicate where the Chibok girls are. The logistics of their rescue would then become a different issue. It is also recommended in this study that as national policy to be domesticated by every local government council in the country, the Leader of market women at the local government level in the Nigerian state should become a member of the Local Government Council, under an ex-officio status. Indeed, for women empowerment to be impactful, its nuances have to be fully democratized and the reality of the empowerment experienced by Nigerian women at every level. Indeed, all over Nigeria, the leader of the market women holds an indisputably important position. To neglect such a woman in the local and national decision making process does not indicate commitment to the course of women empowerment. Empowerment, we recall, is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies to social policy and social change (Perkins and Zimmerman (1995). Merely appointing women elite to high offices cannot be equated to women empowerment. And the truth in this must be internalized by all of us. Furthermore at the local government level, women empowerment must mean the availability of at least one undeniably modern health facility provided by the federal government of Nigeria, for antenatal care for Nigerian women. Women empowerment in Nigeria, must link individual well-being with the larger social and political environment (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). Thus, it is when actions such as the ones highlighted above are seen to have been taken, that women empowerment may deeply have meaning to the generality of Nigerian women.

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