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A Comparative Study of Women's Empowerment, Political Participation and National Development in Nigeria and Rwanda in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This research, focused on a comparative study of women's empowerment, political participation and national development in Nigeria and Rwanda in the 21st century, with the aim of assessing critically, and comparing the progress recorded by the two countries in the implementation and achievements of the Beijing Resolutions of 1995. It also examined the determinants of women empowerment in Rwanda and the root cause of low levels of women's economic empowerment and political participation in Nigeria. The research design and methods used were theoretical and literature review of related works. Findings were subjected to critical analysis before drawing conclusions. The research data was gathered from an in-depth study of the key concepts- women empowerment, political participation, national development, and also from reviewing the available literature in related topics. Findings indicated that major challenges impeding the closure of the gender gap in Nigeria are patriarchal party structure, gender insensitive policies and stereotypes and societal norms. It was concluded that these encumbrances are deliberately included in party guidelines and requirements to keep women perpetually out of full participation in political activities in Nigeria. It was recommended among others that deliberate efforts should be made to remove all gender class divisions including the glass ceiling effects and stereotypes from political participation and all inclusive policies for women political participation.

Key words: Women empowerment, Political participation, National development and gender disparity.

Introduction

Most available record have shown that women have largely been excluded from legislative and executive positions in almost all countries of the world. The World Economic Global Gender Gap Reports (2023) indicated that the global average of women in parliaments and ministerial

positions are 21% and 22.1% respectively. With this trajectory, it will take 131 years to close the gender gap worldwide. However recent Reports from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU Parline 2023) showed that Rwanda tops the chart with the highest number of female representatives in parliaments in the world with 61.3% in the Lower House and 34% in the Upper Chambers. While Nigeria with 3.9% and 2.8%, representation of women in the House of Representatives and the Senate respectively, ranked 182 out of 187 countries, which is below the Sub-Saharan Africa average of 26.1% in both the lower and upper chambers. With this impressive track record, Rwanda has become known for her progressive stance on women's empowerment, by becoming the first country in the world to achieve one of the Millennium Development Goals' target, of having more than 50% of members in parliament, as females.

Feminist political theorists seem to make some interesting and bold assertions regarding the need, not only to factor, the role of women into the analysis of contemporary politics and international relations, but also to understand the important contributions women make to the development of any given society in particular, and the global community at large. Theories of social science in general and those of international relations in particular that ignore women and their role in society are incomplete because they have cut out a significant proportion of the human population. On the other hand, feminist's analysts who focus on the empowerment of women in economic terms but fail to x-ray the role of women in politics and the exercise of power in their respective communities and countries make an inadequate analysis, as they leave out what is important and critical. Finally, asking questions about and exploring the contributions of women in politics, decision making and implementation, can provide a master key to understanding the dynamics of growth and development in many countries of the world (Enloe : 2007). All these assumptions and assertions seem to flow logically from the proceedings and conclusions of the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995.

In view of the fact that more than two and a half decades have elapsed since the resolutions of Beijing on women empowerment were passed, and many countries of the world have domesticated the decisions of Beijing and put them into practice, we consider it expedient to carry

out a comparative study on how this Declaration and related resolutions have impacted on women empowerment and national development in two African countries: Nigeria and Rwanda.

This research, has additionally been motivated by the fact that the global community has taken a keen interest in the welfare and empowerment of women following the Beijing Conference of 1995. It is therefore not surprising that many countries have given special consideration to policies and programmes that have sought to empower women economically and improve their participation in politics, governance and decision-making. At present, Nigeria and Rwanda stand at opposite ends of the spectrum. While Nigeria is still creating awareness and trying to overcome financial constraints, Rwanda is shown as a role model in implementation and promotion of women empowerment and political participation.

Statement of the problem

The study proposed here, has as thesis the view that if women constitute nearly 50% of the total population of most countries, a careful examination of their role in national politics and governance will give us a clearer and more holistic view of the dynamics of the countries under study. This perspective can be supported by the observation made by a former President of the United States of America, Mr. Bill Clinton, who once argued that ‘Women perform 60% of the world’s work, and produce 50% of the food, yet earn only 10% of the income, and own 1% of the property’. In his view the empowerment of women will be a critical part of the solution to some of the world’s current challenges namely: improving education in developing countries, fighting global climate change, or addressing nearly, every other challenge we face. Clinton’s views expressed above were buttressed by the United Nation’s Secretary General, Antonio Guterres who affirmed that women empowerment and gender equality are essential to global progress.

These assertions show clearly that without fully harnessing the active participation of women both nationally and globally, the world is not likely to make significant progress in confronting many of the existing problems and challenges. However, as many feminist writers have argued, just empowering women economically does not address the problem, but only a

significant increase in the role of women in governance and political decision-making can alter the balance of power in favour of the many under privileged, in the society. Though there have been significant progress over the past 25 years, there is still much room for improvement in order to achieve the 35% affirmative action. Some of the interrogations that will guide our study include the following. To what extent have the two countries of our focus gone in domesticating and implementing the ideals of the Beijing Declaration and platform for Action? What is the level of achievements recorded and what are the challenges impeding the actualization of the Beijing Resolutions?

Literature review of key concepts and theoretical framework

Women's empowerment is now a global policy priority in light of its potential contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This concept was not deeply enshrined into government policies and programmes until the declaration of Beijing conference in 1975. Today gender parity is on the front burner of almost all countries in the world. Women emancipation has gained importance among scholars locally and internationally, and currently there are tons of literature on women empowerment, political participation and national development. Empowering women is essential to health and social development of families, communities and countries, that's why one of the major United Nations Millennium Development goals (MDGs) was to promote gender equality and economic empowerment of women. It is generally agreed by observers that the Millennium Development goals have fallen short of achieving gender equality and women empowerment.

At present, more women than men are still living in poverty, penury and bound by negative traditional beliefs and customs. Therefore gender equality and Women economic empowerment are prerequisites for sustainable growth, wellbeing of the family and the nation, and will definitely lead to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which replaced the MDGs. To achieve this noble cause, the government must prioritize policies and programmes that promote women's economic empowerment and political participation. This research will be guided by the Power Theory, as popularly used in contemporary political science. However our study will seek

to operationalize the three (3) dimensions of power namely: Decision making, Agenda setting and Preference shaping as postulated by Ebong and Odock, (2022).

The essence of the study from theoretical perspective is to determine how effective women participation in decision making, agenda setting and preference shaping in political and social action can translate into national development, beneficial not only to women and children but to the larger society.

Women empowerment

The beginning of the concept of empowerment can be traced to the works of Paulo Freire (1921-1997). Freire (1974) argued that every society consist of two groups, the oppressor and the oppressed, and the teacher's job is to create awareness of the social injustice in society, so that the oppressed can liberate themselves. The theme of empowerment and liberation is an important foundation of contemporary political theories, especially those of the Frankfurt School, known more appropriately as Critical Theory (Sachs, Lafortune, Fuller and Drumm, (2023). One of the key issues of the School was social emancipation – the process of giving people social or political freedom and rights.

Kenyatta, (2023) sees empowerment as expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices, particularly in situations where this ability has been denied to them. According to Mahato and Pranab (2020) Empowerment can be viewed as means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions and make choices either individually or collectively for social transformation.

Agarwal (1994) cited by Njaya (2015:84) defined empowerment as a 'process which enhances the ability of disadvantaged (powerless) individuals or groups to challenge and change (in their favour) existing power, relationships that placed them in subordinate economic, social and political positions'. This definition captures the essence of women empowerment. Women empowerment can be seen in context, where women are emancipated from the shackles of social, economic, political and gender based discrimination, and be given opportunities to participate fully in social, political and economic spheres of life. According to Ratman (2013) cited by Masvikieni,

Christine and Mugadza (2017) women empowerment is the 'process of raising awareness, capacity building that lead to greater variety of participation, greater decision-making power, control and transformative action'.

Zakuan and Hassan (2016), Gouws and Madsen (2021), strongly believe that, the struggle for women empowerment started in 1975 when the first world conference on the status of women was held in Mexico city, followed successively by Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985 and the fourth world conference in Beijing in 1995 with its Platform for Action (BDPfA). The Beijing conference, China in 1995 was very significant and marked the actual beginning of the struggle for women empowerment. We consider the Beijing Declaration of 1995 as the major stimulus of contemporary developments on gender equality and women empowerment. In other words women's empowerment, refers to the process of enabling women to make informed decisions, and exercise their rights and freedoms, it also involves challenging gender-based discrimination, marginalization, and oppression, and creating an environment where women can thrive and reach their full potential. The concept of women empowerment encompasses numerous aspects, such as

- i. Economic empowerment: access to economic opportunities.
- ii. Political empowerment: vote and be voted for, hold public offices/political positions and engage in political activism.
- iii. Social empowerment: participate in cultural and other social/artistic/religious activities.
- iv. Legal empowerment: access to legal assistance whenever the need arises. Also implementation of reforms to discriminating laws and prioritizing gender friendly policies.
- v. Educational empowerment: promotion of the girl-child education, investing in women and girl-child education to curb high rate of female dropouts.
- vi. Health and wellbeing empowerment: ensuring that women have access to quality health care services.

For women to be fully empowered all the above dimensions, must be addressed holistically.

Masvikeni et al (2017) opined that 'a woman who is educationally, economically, socio-culturally,

politically and is well aware of the reproductive rights is an empowered woman'. Empowering women benefits not only individuals but also families, communities and societies as a whole. According to Jeannette Bayisenge, the Minister of Gender and Family Planning in Rwanda (Vanguard News, July 1, 2022), research shows that improving gender equality, helps foster reconciliation and peace-building, increases economic growth, reduces poverty, enhances societal well-being and helps ensure sustainable development. Asaju and Adagba (2013) asserted that "women represent a tool for positive change, depending on how, they are treated and the levels of opportunities given to them to actualize their potentials'. To a great extent, women have been contributing greatly to the growth and development of every nation in the world.

Political participation

Participation of women in political field and in various decision-making positions is one of the important tools of empowerment. In actual fact the most effective and excellent way of women empowerment is participation in the political process. Women political participation is not only a fundamental right but also essential for achieving gender equality. According to Mahato and Berman, (2020) political participation refers to, activity that has the interest or effect of influencing government action - either directly, by affecting the making or implementation of public policy, or indirectly, by influencing the selection of people who make those policies. Women's political participation refers to the involvement of women in the political process, including to vote and be voted for, hold elective positions and general participation in political activism. One of the tenets of democracy is political participation. Democracy avails both men and women the freedom and equal opportunity to participate in politics without discrimination, as all citizens are required to take part in the democratic institutions and processes. Mandal (2013) asserted that 'democracy becomes meaningless and paralyzed unless 50% of its population participates in democratic decision making processes and joins in economic and social activities'.

The views expressed above was buttressed by Chadwick (2018) who affirmed that, politics, governance is not a birthright or privilege reserved for men, in a country where almost half the

population is female, the abysmal number of women in political offices is certainly not a representative of the reality and is definitely not indicative of modern day democracy. For democracy to thrive, men and women should be given equal opportunity to take part in political processes in their nations, because women's political participation strengthens democratic institutions and processes. Mushahary, (2020) asserted that if the African women are not empowered to be in forefront of decision-making, there will be no meaningful development, and the democracy of such nation will not be said to be true.

Women's participation in labour force is widely recognized as a prerequisite for promoting economic growth and reduction of poverty in the society. Ogunjemilua and Familugba, (2015) strongly believe that women participation in governance can lead to increased income, improved nutrition and health, and greater decision -making power within the house hold. But the sad reality is that women are still systematically underrepresented in decision-making processes that shape the societies. Chalaby (2017) remarked that half of the world's population are women, but currently women only hold 23% of all seats in parliaments and senates globally. Oloyade (2019) stated that in Nigeria, women participation in politics has remained in average of 6.7% in elective and appointive positions, which is far below the Global Average of 22.5%, Africa Regional Average of 23.4% and West African Sub Regional Average of 15%.

This portrays that women are grossly underrepresented in key positions in government in Nigeria. Ebong and Odock (2022) and Ogbodo (2021) have identified numerous challenges such as traditional gender roles, male structured political party system, gender-based stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes, violence against women in politics, and lack of financial resources, contending against women taking active part in politics.

National development

National development refers to the process of improving the economic, social, political and cultural well-being of a nation, fostering stability, prosperity and happiness for its citizens. The role of women in national development cannot be over emphasized, because women play vital roles, and contribute significantly to the economic social, political and social development of every

country in the world. Asaju and Adagba (2023); Mahato and Pranab (2020), and Sama (2017) strongly believe that, the important ingredient for empowering women for national development is education. Education is an imperative tool for national development, without it, women cannot really contribute meaningfully to national development, as education is the bedrock of nation building and has a significant impact on various aspects of development.

Education gives access to information, more economic and political influence, and lack of education limit the upward mobility of Nigerian women (Ogunjemilua and Familuga, 2015). Women education can be seen as empowering women academically, and equipping them to become independent and assume responsibilities for their own lives and the lives of others.

Women education leads to poverty reduction as educated women are more likely to manage resources effectively. Education empowers women to challenge gender-based discrimination and advocates for their rights. Educated women will understand the dynamics of politics and will be willing to participate in politics, leading to more inclusive decision. Rahman (2020) and Shali (2018) opined that, the first step towards women empowerment is to provide education to them. Njaya (2015: 84) asserts that ‘education is the fundamental right from which all individuals should benefit equally without discrimination- on sex, religion, ethnicity, political affiliation or creed’.

The importance of women education for national development are too numerous to mention. Investing in women’s education is essential for building a more equitable, prosperous, and developed nation. Education empowers women to reach their full potential, contributing to national development and growth. Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala (2020) asserted that both male and female should be given access to quality education without discrimination, in order to bring out their full potentials.

Why Nigeria and Rwanda.

At first glance our choice of Nigeria and Rwanda as focus for our study, of women empowerment, political participation and development might seem strange, given the differences in size, total population and natural endowments. However on closer examination, there are many elements that make the two countries good examples for comparison: Both Nigeria and Rwanda

are post-colonial societies battling with the challenges of poverty and national development. Both countries have gone through traumatic historical experiences that call for creative expertise in peace building and national reconciliation: Nigeria went through tragic coups d'état, followed by a bloody civil war between 1966 and 1970, and ever since continues to search for the magic leadership style and governance mix to weld the multiplicity of ethnic and cultural groups into a viable polity. Rwanda on her part was also plagued with a continuous ethnic conflict and rivalry between the majority Hutu group and the minority ruling Tutsi group, which culminated in the unfortunate genocide of 1994 which left about 800,000 Tutsis dead. Since after the genocide, Rwanda has been in search of a winning formula for fostering national unity and integration.

It is obvious that in both countries since it was men who led the coups d'état and the civil war in Nigeria, and played key roles in the genocide in Rwanda, the expectation is that in both countries, women could be expected to be the change agents to unify the countries and push forward the development agenda. Also Rwanda has become known for its progressive stance on women's empowerment and gender equality by becoming the first country to have more than 50% of female members in parliament and ministerial positions. Hence our resolve to focus our research on a comparative study of the role of women in political governance in two African countries Nigeria and Rwanda, especially with regards to the accomplishment of the Sustainable Development Goals, which lay emphasis on Gender Equality.

This research will assess critically the progress recorded by the two countries under study in domesticating and implementing the Beijing Framework for women empowerment and participation in politics. It will also ascertain the level of women participation in one of the key institutions of governance (Parliaments), of the two countries as an indicator of the progress made so far in that arm of government. Other objectives of the research are to ascertain the level of success, qualitative and quantitative in the accomplishment of the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality), and determine the differences in the above parameters between the two countries under study and draw relevant conclusions.

Nigeria and Rwanda: Some Notable Achievements and Major Challenges after 25 Years of Adoption and Domestication of the Beijing Declaration.

Sequel to the Beijing Conference of 1995, the United Nations General Assembly has been holding special sessions, every 5 years (2000, 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020) to conduct reviews and appraisals of progress achieved, ascertain the challenges impeding the full/effective implementation of the Beijing Resolutions, and also consider future actions/ initiatives to bridge the gender gap globally. Our study focused on the level of achievements recorded so far and the challenges encountered in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially the 12 critical areas of concern highlighted by the United Nations Organization. Nigeria and Rwanda are amongst the 165 countries that have adopted and domesticated the Beijing Conference ideals for women empowerment and political participation.

Both countries have made some significant progress in formulating policies, enacting laws, developing agendas, creating awareness and opportunities to increase the percentage of women in governance and decision-making positions. Also measures, strategies, related projects and programmes, on gender equality have been designed to support and empower women and girls (Federal Republic of Nigeria National Beijing + 25 Review (May, 2019). The overview analysis of some of the achievements recorded and the challenges faced by Nigeria in the implementation of the SDGs in the past 25 years include:

Nigeria: Some Notable Achievements.

Nigeria has made tangible progress in the under listed areas

- Equality and Non Discrimination under the law.
- Gender responsive social investment programming and budgets.
- Poverty eradication, agricultural productivity and food security.
- Women's entrepreneurship and women enterprises.
- Digital and financial inclusion for women.

Major Challenges:

- Gender stereotypes, social norms and cultural barriers.
- Lack of up-to-date gender disaggregated data.
- Difficulties in addressing the intersectional nature of gender inequality.
- Inadequate funding to implement programmes and policies.
- Insecurity, Gender Based Violence (GBV) and conflicts.
- Non domestication of major treaties and poor implementation of some of the sector specific laws and policies (<https://www.unwomen.org>).

RWANDA: Some Major Achievements.

- Gender mainstreaming in the national strategic planning and development frameworks.
- Gender Responsive Legal Framework.
- Constitutional requirement of 30 % of all decision-making positions reserved for women in public institutions/organs.
- Implementation of reforms which grant women rights to own and use land.
- Increased women's empowerment and participation in political and decision making positions.
- Improved health care services for women.
- Financing for Gender Equality.

Key Challenges

- Poverty among women and girls.
- Limited access to and control over productive resources and entrepreneurship skills.
- Gender Based Violence (GBV).
- Unpaid care workers' wages.
- Limited access to alternative sources of energy for poor women.

(Republic of Rwanda. Beijing +25 Rwanda Country Report. May 2019,

[https://www e- ihuriro.rcsprwanda.org](https://www.e-ihuriro.rcsprwanda.org))

Progress Recorded by Nigeria and Rwanda in the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal 5. (Gender Equality).

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 emphasizes the importance of gender equality by calling on member states to end all forms of discrimination, violence and harmful practices against women and girls in the public and private spheres. It also insists on equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of political and decision-making positions for women. According to the United Nations charter, gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Providing women and girls with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and economic decision-making processes will fuel economies and benefit societies and humanity at large. SDG 5 has 9 Targets and 14 indicators.

Targets specify the goals, and the indicators represent the metrics by which the achievements made could be tracked. The aim is to ensure women’s full and effective participation in politics by 2030. SDG 5 is very crucial to our study, thus we will assess the progress made and the achievement recorded by the two countries, in closing the gender equality gap in parliaments from 1999 – 2023 (see table 1).

Table 1: Global ranking of female representatives in Parliaments from 1999-2023

Year	Country	Rank (in descending order)	Lower House Election	Seat	women	% W	Upper House Election	Seat	women	% W
Dec. 1999	Rwanda	31 st out of 178	11 :1994	70	12	17.1%	----	----	----	----
	Nigeria	?	02 : 1999	360	7**	1.9%**	02:1999	109	3	2.8%
Dec. 2003	Rwanda	1 st out of 181	09 : 2003	80	39	48.8%	09:2003	20	6	30.0%
	Nigeria	107 th out of 181	04 : 2003	360	17	4.9%	04:2003	107	3	2.8%
Dec. 2007	Rwanda	1 st out of 188	09 : 2003	80	39	48.8%	09 :2003	20	9	34.6%
	Nigeria	117 th out of	04 : 2007	358	25	7.0 %	04: 2007	109	9	8.3%
Dec. 2011	Rwanda	1 st out of 189	09 : 2008	80	45	56.3%	09: 2011	26	10	38.5%
	Nigeria	125 th out of 189	04 : 2011	360	24	6.8%	04: 2011	109	7	6.4%
Dec. 2015	Rwanda	1 st out of 190	09 : 2013	80	51	63.8%	09: 2011	26	10	38.5%
	Nigeria	134 th out 190	03 : 2015	360	20	5.6%	03: 2015	108	7	6.5%
Dec. 2019	Rwanda	1 st out of 190	09 : 2018	80	49	61.3%	09: 2019	26	10	38.5%

	Nigeria	186 th out of 190	02 : 2019	360	12	3.4%	02: 2019	107	7	6.5%
Dec. 2023	Rwanda	1 st out of 185	09: 2018	80	49	61.3%	09: 2019	26	9	34.8%
	Nigeria	181 st out of 185	02: 2023	360	14	3.9%	02: 2023	109	3	2.8%

Source. IPU Parline: Global Data on National Parliaments

Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments

Data. IPU.org/women-ranking/date.

** Additional data from Center for Democracy and Development.

<https://www.funkebaruwa.com>.

The Differences in the above Parameters between the two Countries under Study

The indices from table 1, indicate that, in 1999 the total percentage of female legislators in the House of Representatives and the Senate were 1.9% and 2.8% respectively and in 2023 the percentage stands at 3.9% in House of Representatives and 2.8% in the Senate. This clearly shows that, Nigeria has not made progress in women representatives in parliaments despite the 30% Affirmative Action. Also the reports presented by the *Nigeria National Beijing + 25 Review (May 2019)*, demonstrates that, women are still underrepresented in politics and decision-making positions. From inadequate funding and lack of implementation of programmes and policies, to insecurities and the male dominated political arena and patriarchal societies, Nigeria still has a long way to go in closing the Gender Equality Gap..

Data from Sustainable Development Goals Dashboards Index (2023) for sub-Saharan Africa indicated that Nigeria's performance in the implementation of SDGs is characterized by these 3 indicators:

- Moderately increasing
- 1) Stagnating
- 2) Major challenges still remain.

With this below average performance, in low female representation in parliaments and poor performance in achievement of the SDGs, closing the gender gap in Nigeria may remain a mirage. Blessing Obidegwu, Deputy Director of the Gender Division in Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria, remarked that 'Nigeria is a signatory to a number of regional and international protocols and treaties pertaining to the protection of women's rights, including guarantees of access equality, especially in the realm of politics. Despite Nigeria's signature on

each of these agreements, Nigerian women continue to be disadvantaged in all areas of activity, including government, (The Guardian, 22nd January 2020).

Although the Nigerian constitution provides for gender equality and nondiscrimination, and the government has created awareness and developed some mechanisms for women empowerment by providing opportunities to increase the percentage of women in governance and decision-making positions, the term 'gender equality' is still very offensive in many geographical areas of the country. In 2021 some senators rejected the Gender and Equality Bill which included equal rights for women in marriage, divorce, property ownership and inheritance, according to them, enacting a law to accord women equal rights with men was un-African and anti-religious (Iroanusi, 2022.)

Without the willingness of state and non-state actors to prioritize gender sensitive policies and programmes, gender parity will remain constrained and the status quo maintained. Kenyatta (2023) opines that, the political goodwill of a country is a major contributor to women's inclusion in politics. It is rather unfortunate that, while other countries are moving towards emancipation of women by harnessing their potentials for sustainable development, peace and prosperity of their nations, Nigerian women are still struggling to be heard and seen.

In an effort to bridge the gender gap, the Nigerian government has formulated some economic policies and designed some related programmes to empower the women, which include: Social Investment Portfolio budgets, integrated in National budgets since 2016. Establishment of cottage industries in some states. Business Development Fund for women (BUDFOW), Women Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE), women component of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Fund (MSMEDF). In spite of these legal frameworks and measures/strategies put in place to reduce gender inequality, empower more women, and create more opportunities for women's participation in politics, inadequate funding makes it difficult for these projects to be fully implemented.

In addition, many impediments are constantly placed against women at every level, which include- the current male standard structure of political parties with equally male dominated positions on one hand and violence against women in politics on the other hand. Also the literacy level of women is low, compared to that of men in Nigeria. Education equips women with information to communicate effectively and adapt to the changing modern world thus increasing their level of empowerment.

In 1994, Rwanda was a nation in ruins, after the genocide. The economy and all developmental sectors were destroyed. Rwanda gradually embarked on inclusive rebuilding process involving men and women, driven by vision 2020. In less than 3 decades, Rwanda has registered tremendous economic growth, lifting millions out of poverty and making progress in all developmental sectors as a result of sustained economic policies and programmes. Twenty five years after the Beijing Declaration, Rwanda has achieved a lot based on strong political will, commitment in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women at all levels in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

With the provision and implementation of 30% quota for women in politics and decision-making positions Rwanda leads the world in women representation in parliament and ministerial positions with 61% and 34% respectively. Rwanda has performed better, and has recorded notable progress than Nigeria in the implementation and progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals especially on the 12 critical areas of concern of the Platform for Action. This great feat was achieved by formulating many gender sensitive policies, anti-discriminating laws and other legal frameworks to empower and protect women and girls. Some of the laws and reforms are:

- 30% of elective offices reserved only for women
 - Laws and administrative practices for equal rights and access to economic resources.
 - Laws on access and equal ownership and utilization of land. This law allows women to use their land as collateral to obtain loan and encourages financial independence among women.
- 3) Laws on punishment of Gender Based Violence (GBV) and crimes.

In order to pave way for women's financial inclusion and empowerment, the government of Rwanda continues to implement policies (macro-economic policies and strategies) and social protection programmes aim at reducing poverty among women and girls. Some of the programmes include Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP), Ubudehe, One cup of milk per child program and One Cow per Poor Family (GRINKA). These pro-poor programmes provide direct support in terms of cash transfer, access to financial and loan services. Through implementation of these policies and programmes, Rwanda has been able to achieve most of the SDGs on gender equality.

The statistics and information on progress and achievements of the SDGs from the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index Report (2023), indicated that Rwanda has achieved most of the SDG 5 targets. On women Economic Participation and Opportunity, and Political Empowerment, Rwanda is ranked 48th and 6th positions respectively out of 156 countries in both categories, while Nigeria is ranked 78th on the first category and 149th position on the second out of 156 countries. Also from the reports presented by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs Ranking -2023) on overall performance of all UN Member States, Rwanda performed better than Nigeria and was ranked higher, on the progress made in the achievement of the SDGs.

From 17.1% in 1999 to 61.3% in 2023, of women in the Lower Chamber, and also maintaining a steady average of not less than 30% of female representatives in the Upper Chamber between 2003 – 2023, Rwanda has made giant strides in increasing female representation in parliaments (see table 1). By introducing more gender-sensitive policies, amending or repealing discriminatory laws, revoking negative traditions and norms, Nigeria can also record phenomenal progress not only in the achievement of the SDGs but also in increasing the number of women in elective and appointive positions in the country.

Recommendations

The Recommendations emanating from the study, on what should be done to empower women and increase their political participation in Nigeria. Government should -

1. Prioritize policies and programmes that promote women's economic empowerment and political participation.
2. Reserved 30% of political positions for the female contestants, in line with the Affirmative Action.
3. Prioritize female education, by subsidizing women's secondary and university education.
4. Restructure political parties system to accommodate women and their peculiar needs.
5. Create awareness campaigns on the advantages of women empowerment and political participation.
6. Take a legal stand against violence on women in politics,

Conclusion

Many African countries signed and adopted the ideals of the Beijing conference but have not been able to effectively implement the agreement, thus women are still marginalized and underrepresented in economic and political sectors. Women's empowerment and political participation can be achieved through providing education, equal labour-force participation, repealing discriminatory laws against women, good media exposure and correction of negative traditional norms.

According to Michelle Bachelet, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women, 'When women are empowered and can claim their rights, have access to land, leadership opportunities and choices, economies grow, food security is enhanced and prospects are improved for current generations'. Today, Rwanda is acknowledged as one of the stable nations in Africa, with the highest number of female representation in parliaments in the world (61.3%). Obviously Rwandan women have played key roles in the economic transformation of their country, because of the equal opportunities given to them to unleash their talents and potentials.

Bayisenge (2022) confirmed that 'female empowerment was and is one of the main driving forces of this transformation as well as one of its most valuable'. Secondly Rwanda is setting the pace for other African nations on effective implementation of the SDGs, because it has successfully integrated the SDGs into the national planning and monitoring framework by using

home grown solutions rooted in their culture to enhance and accelerate developmental and economic growth. It is time for Nigeria women to be empowered, get fully involved in governance and contribute their quota to the growth of their country. According to Joy Onyesoh, Director for the Women International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in Nigeria, a bird never flies on one wing, for us to have sustainable peace and development in Nigeria, we need to have men and women seated at the decision-making table.

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