

**POLITICAL THUGGERY, VIOLENCE AND WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN  
POLITICS IN NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Nigeria's political system is characterized by thuggery, violence, harassment and marginalization of women in electoral process because, the system is a male dominated system that constitutes major barrier to women political aspiration in contesting for elective positions at all levels of governments. The available records proved that since Nigerian returned to democratic rule in 1999, the number and percentage of women who contested for political offices at all levels of governments were not commensurate with total population of women in Nigeria and this could be described as the whittling down of involvement of women in electioneering process. Relying on secondary data, theoretical mode of analysis was adopted in order to understand that ethical issues, party intrigues, as well as political violence became so prevalent in electioneering process in Nigeria and called for sober reflection. It is in the light of this that this paper believed that for balance political participation devoid of gender inequality, Nigerian women need to be more enlightening about the need to fully involve and aspires for more elective political positions at all level of governments no matter the level of harassment and intimidations. Because, their aspirations to be elected to public offices is their constitutional rights which cannot be denied violently by thuggery and violence associated with electioneering process in Nigeria.*

**Key words: Political Thuggery, Violence, Women Participation, Nigerian Politics**

**Introduction**

Over the years women have been relegated to the background in issues of the overall development especially in the developing nations like Nigeria. This is borne out of the sentimental attachment on feminine gender. Historical evidences have proved that the Nigerian women have for long been playing crucial role in political life of the country, and this has contributed in no small measure in shaping the political system of the nation. However, since the country returned to democratic rule in 1999, the existing political system has been associated with violence, thuggery and intimidations of opposition irrespective of

their gender affinity. It is a male dominated chauvinistic society stifled by culture, tradition and social rankings that promotes gender inequality and women discrimination in the scheme of things.

In 1985, Nigeria ratified the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women of 1979 (CEDAW). But it is worthy to note that the operation of the 30 articles of the convention in Nigeria is not achieved. Nigeria also adopted the 1985 Beijing Platform of Action and signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, The African Charter on People's Rights, The Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo protocol). Even with the affirmative action of 35% representation of women in political and non elective positions in Nigeria, the number of women in the legislative houses is not encouraging as a result of the patriarchal dominance of the men in Nigeria's politics (Johnson, 2016).

Today, women are participating more actively in political issues but were not many when it comes to contesting for political offices. More often than not, they are besieged with challenges of which discrimination is rife, majority of the men more on chauvinistic disposition with believes that women should be preoccupied with domestic matters while the decision making should be exclusively for the men folk and women are to be instructed on what to do either in public or private engagements. According to Gonyok (2016), in political circle and public governance, the percentage of Nigerian women elected to public offices are not encouraging when compared with some developed countries where the political system are favourably to women aspirations into public offices without any harassment or intimidation.

Since the beginning of the fourth republic, the existing literatures revealed that the involvement of women participation in electioneering process are at lower ebb despite the facts that there are many Nigerian women who highly educated and possesses the needed requirements to vie for any political offices but unfortunately, researches proved that many women decided to fortifies their inalienable rights to seek for political offices because, the nature of electioneering process has been characterized with intimidation, harassment,

monetization and violence which are not favourable to them. Also, the general perception of men who often see women as second class citizens with unfavourable social, economic, cultural and religious factors which is hampering their desires to aspire in contesting for public offices. Women have been relegated to the background on issues of overall development especially in developing nations like Nigeria. This is borne out of sentimental attachments of feminine gender in Nigeria's political system (Umar, 2013).

In the elective positions in Nigeria since 1999, it is evident that women have not reached 10% representation. From 1999 till date, no woman has been elected as Vice President not to talk about President. Empirically, the data from the National Centre for women Development showed in 1999 that there were 9 female Senators elected to the National Assembly compared to 4 in 2003. Also, there were 26 female members in the House of Representatives elected compared to 23 in 2003. Between 2006 and 2009, two women were appointed to the Supreme Court bench, while female Deputy Governors increased from 2 in 2003 to 6 in 2007. Despite these improvements, women are still under-represented in most levels of government and have little progress in attaining position at the decision-making levels of the government (Otiye-Igbuzor, 2014).

In April 2007 general elections, Nigeria witness more increased numbers of women aspirants in all political parties where there were total of 1,200 women aspirants contested to 1,532 offices, with 660 of them winning their primaries. 93 finally emerged as winners in the general elections with 6 Deputy Governors, 9 Senators, 27 House of Representatives and 52 in various State Houses of Assembly. There were also notable increases in the number of women holding cabinet and ministerial positions with the emergency of first female speaker of the House of Representatives, Rt. (Hon) Patricia Olubunmi Etteh who was later removed unceremoniously barely four months in office. In 2011, only one woman contested for the post of the president under the platform of the Peoples Democratic Party and because of the nature of Nigeria's political system she did not survive the primary election (Otiye-Igbuzor, 2014). Despite all these, Nigerian women have lagged behind in political power and decision making which is one of the key areas identified during the 1995 Beijing Conference.

Women have always been discriminated against when it comes to politics; men have an upper hand than women. The political playing field is uneven and not conducive to women's participation. Women who enter politics find the political, cultural and social environment often not women friendly. It is in the light of this persistent unfavourable political system to Nigerian women that this paper title ' ' political thuggery, violence and women participation in politics in Nigeria'' need to critically examine the impact of political thuggery and violence places in women participation in electioneering process in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

#### **Political Thuggery and Political Violence**

Political Thuggery is an act of political violence or behaviour by ruffians hired or instigated by politicians to intimidate their opponents. It is the intentional use of physical force threatened against another person or a group or community that either results in injury, death, psychological harm or deprivation within a political circle. According to Mandyen (2017), it can be seen as organized act that seeks to influence an electoral process with objective of gaining an unfair political advantage over another and geared towards winning political power by subverting the ends of the electoral and democratic process through intimidation and disempowerment of political opponents.

To Njoku (2012), political violence might occur at different stages of the electoral process, either before, during or after the election. It is a means of using force to disrupt political meetings or voting at polling stations, or the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral processes or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with electoral processes. Political violence usually includes snatching of ballot boxes, stuffing of ballot boxes, elimination of political opponents, riots and thuggery, forceful declaration of fake results even where no election is held, refusal to swear in winner of election or refusal to vacate office after losing election. Njoku (2012), later identified some major causes of political violence in Nigeria as:

- i. Corruption
- ii. Unemployment
- iii. Lack of adequate security
- iv. Lack of democratic culture

#### v. Failure of the justice system

Political thuggery is a serious threat to democratic consolidation and scares credible candidates, including women from active participation in democratic process. Jonathan (2016) opined that that political violence encourages militarization of political space with the consequent proliferation of arms, ammunition and other dangerous weapons purposely for acts of criminality, including thuggery. This, in turn, has resulted in many unresolved politically motivated assassinations across the country, which diminishes the country's evolving democratic culture. Political thuggery is evil that must be avoided. The society is not convenient with the attitude and act of thuggery during electioneering process (Jonathan, 2016).

In developing countries, political thuggery and violence are gaining so much ground and recognition in political gathering which has been major causes of threat to peace and democratic governance in Africa. George (2014) believed that with political thuggery, the security of lives and property cannot be fully guaranteed because the law enforcement agencies are sometimes compromises in their operations to support the regime in power. Therefore, thuggery brings shame to a nation and it affects the socio-economic and political development of the nation. Adeleke (2013) concluded that political violence against women's participation in politics has been part of human history and many societies have lived with it without condemning it, because women are perceived as not a force to reckon with in electioneering process in Africa.

#### **Political Participation**

Political participation express right to rule, freedom of expression, association, right to free flow of communication, influence decision process and right to social justice. It also express such rights to demand for better social and health services, better working conditions and increase in wages. To Garuba (2016), political participation is those voluntary activities through which members of the society share in ruler's selection directly or indirectly in the formation of public policies.

Political participation involves series of activities engaged in by an individual to influence decision-making process. It is general way through which the civic activities of the citizen

are display and are critical part of any democracy. As the name suggests, political participation simply means that a person is participating in the political process by making his or her opinions and beliefs known. It is often used to describe an action taken by a citizen to influence the outcome of a political issue.

Anifowose (1999) opined that political participation encompasses many activities used by citizens to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies pursue. The scholar believed that political participation derives from the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate with citizens towards capturing the machinery of government, ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government.

In another development, Adelekan (2010) believed that political participation is the process through which an individual plays a role in political life of the society and has the opportunity to take part in deciding what common goals of the society are and the best way of achieving these goals. It is an aspect of political behaviour and it focuses on the way in which individuals take part in politics. It is a voluntary activity and one may participate directly or indirectly. The various ways by which the people can be involved in the political system include selection or election of political leaders, formulation of policies, community activities and other civic engagements and the essence of political participation in any society, either civilized or primitive, is to seek control of power, acquisition of power and to influence decision making. Falade (2008) however maintained that cultural, economic, political, religious and educational backgrounds of individuals are some of the major factors that determine political participation in Nigeria.

In principle, the concept of political participation may be applied to the entire citizen irrespective of gender differences. It is about strategic aspects of encouraging people to practically partake in electioneering process. Therefore, women need to be motivated to fully involve in political activities at all levels because it has been established that the development of any country requires the full participation of both men and women at all sphere of human endeavour.

### **Nigerian Women and Politics: An overview**

In West Africa, Nigerian women are taking the lead in pressurizing government to implement 30% quota for women in political offices. Regardless of the social and political advancement made, women generally continue to be exploited in every society globally. According to Agbalajobi (2009), the Commonwealth People's forum held in Nigeria in 2008 deliberated extensively on the role of government and the civil society on how to take concrete actions in utilizing the needed opportunities to promote affirmative action for women at all levels of representation in government.

In Nigeria, women are at least half the country's population of over 170 million people if not more than, yet this numerical strength of women does not automatically translate to increase in women's representation in governance. Nigeria cannot claim to be a democratic country until there is visible evidence in practical terms, a radical turn around in the condition of women generally. They should be empowered to have access to all aspects of governance as equal partners with their male counterparts. Agbalajobi (2010), maintained that by being excluded them from key positions in political party organs and public offices, the tradition of women as house wives whose place them naturally in the kitchen and not the political arena is being portrayed and perpetuated.

Historically, women have been discriminated against either in participation of election of political leaders or emerging as political leaders. There is huge gender inequality in political leadership. For instance in the pre independence, the Clifford constitution of 1922 restricted the electorate to adult males in Calabar and Lagos who have been resident in the city for at least one year and had a gross annual income of N100.00. The Richard constitution of 1946 only reduced the property qualification to N50.00. The Macpherson constitution removed property qualification but still restricted the electorate to only adult males who pay their taxes. In fact, it was not until 1979 before the right to vote was extended to all Nigerian women. While men started voting in Nigeria in 1922, women in all parts of the country started voting in 1979, a difference of fifty seven years (Obasanjo, 2012).

In the fourth republic the available data proved that Nigerian women’s level of political participation is at lower ebb despite the level of awareness created by the civil society organization while some political parties granted waivers for the women in the course of payment of nomination forms to contest for political offices in Nigeria. Despite all the adventure, the end result is that the number of women in political leadership is very low and not encouraging as can be seen from the below table.

S/N	Position	No of Available Seats	No of Women in 1999	No of Women in 2003	No of Women in 2007	No of Women in 2011	No of women in 2015
1.	Presidency	2	0	0	0	0	0
2.	Senate	109	3	4	8	8	7
3.	House of Reps	360	12	23	26	26	19
4.	Governorship	36	0	0	0	0	0
5.	Deputy Governorship	36	1	2	6	3	4
6.	States Houses of Assembly	990	12	38	54	62	NA
7.	<b>Total</b>	<b>1533</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>99</b>	

**Source: INEC Data Base**

Also, during 2007 elections, women constituted about 11% of all candidates with only one woman contesting for the office of the President; 33.9% for governorship positions; 13.5% for Senate, 15.6% for House of Representatives, and 15.8% for Houses of Assembly. At the end of the elections, women occupied only about 7.5 percent of key leadership positions in Nigeria and interestingly, when the Yar’Adua administration came into office, it promised to give 30 percent of political appointment to women (less than the 35 percent in the National Gender Policy). But an assessment conducted by Action Aid after one year indicated that women appointment was only 11 percent (Ogazi, 2017).

Official records released by INEC shows that a total of 809 women emerged as candidates for the 2011 elections on the platforms of various political parties. This represents a 17% increase over 692 women who emerged as candidates during the 2007 elections. But when the results were released, women’s representation at national level regressed slightly from 7.5% in 2007 to 7.1% in 2011. In the 2015 elections, the number further decreased to 7 in Senate (6.4 percent) and 19 in House of Representatives (5.2 percent) while during President Goodluck Jonathan administration, women occupied 33 percent of cabinet positions.

This decreased to 19 percent in President Muhammad Buhari's cabinet. However, Njoku (2012) believed that declining in the number of women in active politics can be associated with series of violence and intimidation associated with Nigerian political system because, political violence has taken centre stage in Nigerian politics and many politicians in the country today rely on this strategy for attaining electoral victory, this scares many women off and presents the political environment as very hostile. Political brutality is employed to distract women's attention from participating in politics, sometimes they are beaten up, their family members are threatened, their marriages are set up for destruction, and these strategies scare women from the political race.

Beside this intimidation, participation in politics involves huge financial investment because it is assumed that electoral victory amounts to a poverty eradication initiative for the victor as victory guarantees access to the national treasury for looting. This therefore has made attaining in elective or appointive position in government highly competitive and nearly out of reach to women who do not have equal opportunities as men to accumulate wealth and increase their economic base (Olugbemi, 2004).

### **Thuggery and Violence: The Two Most Common Elements of Nigerian Politics**

Since the first republic, there are no any administrations in Nigeria that can be said to be immune from the syndrome of political thuggery and violence. Thuggery has been elevated to a fashionable but regrettable status within the Nigerian politics. The number of thugs a politician can keep serves as a determining factor for his electoral machinations and outcome. Thuggery has become a means to an end in Nigerian politics. It is a means of sustaining power and life, an asset that brings money for thugs for life sustenance while it brings and sustain power for their barons.

To Gboyega (2004), thuggery and political violence is indispensable instrument in the hands of hungry power seekers. Since Godfathers are themselves the ruling elite or potential ruling elite, their activities have been institutionalized to the point of subverting the constitution for parochialism and aggrandizement. Political Godfathers are by design placed above the laws of the land including the constitution; they and their thugs can carry arms without hindrance in Nigeria. They are entitled to police escorts and are immune to crime of abduction,

harassment and maiming. As well as various political purposes such as intimidating harassment, violence, assassination of their target opponent while some of the thugs are placed on regular salaries, with allowance accompanying their remuneration. Some of them are employed as special adviser, special assistant and personal assistants when they won the election while those who do not fit in for the aforementioned positions are made contractors to the government. Still, some are paid off immediately after the usual assignment (Gboyega, 2004).

Njoku (2012) averred further that politician recruits the youths comprising of men as their thugs and touts. Most of these thugs were used to rig elections in 2003 and 2007 general elections in Nigeria, especially in the south-west, where most of the bye elections were monitored and conducted by political thugs as officers who were officially designated to do the job was over powered by the hoodlums, causing crises and violence in the voting venues. These thugs compelled innocent people to vote against their wishes. The party agents at the polling booths were threatened to compromise and INEC official were forced to compromise in rigging. This according to Njoku (2012) resulted women political apathy experienced in electioneering process in Nigeria.

### **Causes of Political Thuggery and Violence in Nigeria**

Jonathan (2016) summarizes the cause of political violence in Nigeria as follows:

**Poverty and Unemployment:** To Jonathan (2016), majority of youth in this nation are jobless, with no means of livelihood, they are impoverished and mercenary politics becomes the way out. The politicians capitalize on this and recruit the youth who not only constitute the pillar of society but also the most vulnerable to the self-inflicted poverty as their thugs and touts to perpetrate violence.

**Sit-tight Syndrome:** This has become a phenomenon in Nigerian politics. This is situation in which an individual tries to hold on to power for personal aggrandizement or gains. In an attempt to hang on to power, leaders often create a regime of violence, repression and bloodshed. They organize political thugs, hooligans and scavengers to sing their praises, intimidate opponents and kill them if they become intransigent. The unnecessary and uncoordinated urge to control, dominate and amass wealth for their progeny in the infinite future by the politician informs the emergence of the sit-tight phenomenon (Jonathan, 2016).

**Prebendal Politics:** In Nigeria, politics is conceived as an investment. Ezew (2003) maintained that politicians having invested colossally on campaigns and other political activities, coupled with existing system of winner takes all, want to win election at all cost. And the need to employ the use of thugs and touts to destabilized and rig elections become inevitable, especially when such politicians are not popular candidates. Ezew (2003) however concluded that domination and marginalization of the people, groups and individual in the acquisition and sharing of political post, rigging and manipulation of political process in favour of one group or the other are also major causes of thuggery and violence in political process in Nigeria.

### **Incidence of Thuggery and Violence in Nigerian Politics: A Challenge for Vibrant Participation of Women in Active Politics**

Political thuggery and violence is an illegitimate and unauthorized use of force to effect decisions against the will or desires of others. It represents a disturbance to political equilibrium system of the state. It is all collective attacks within a political community against the political regime, its actors including competing political groups as well as incumbents or its policies. Therefore, political thuggery is an illegitimate and violent means of seeking political power with a view to subverting national opinion for parochial ends through self-imposition. It is simply the criminalization of politics. When politics is criminalized, it is left in the hands of ruffians, thugs and hooligans because the good people are scared away (Howell, 2004).

In Nigeria, the general perception is that that male politician formulates and finance political crises than their women counterpart. This is because women find it difficult if not impossible to breed and keep thugs for political purpose. Due to the near anarchical nature of Nigerian polity and society, women who want to participate in politics usually discover that the political environment is often unfriendly. Rather than being democratized, the struggle for power among the various contending groups in the polity, the civil disturbances, rise of ethnic-militias and politically motivated killing of opponents are pointers to increasing or simmering militarism of Nigerian state, which has further discouraged women from participating in politics (Adeniyi, 2003).

Agbalajobi (2010) believed that women naturally are not as strong as men and so cannot be engaged in thuggery and violence in the course of actualization of their political aspiration because naturally, Nigerian women doesn't like to be seen as thug or perceive as sponsor of such. Women like to preserve their dignity anywhere they found themselves and since Nigeria political terrain embraces thuggery and violence, it becomes difficult for women to compete favourably with men in such situation. Women cannot struggle in the atmosphere of rancour and violence. The fear of being attacked is always in their heart, their mind is not as strong as that of men. As mothers, women cannot risk anybody's life for election victory which the men in Nigerian politics care less about.

Jonathan (2016) posited further that thuggery and violence are not gender neutral, male youths and men commit much of the political violence globally. Males are at the centre of political tussles. The killings and distractions reported from the different political dispensations results from men's quest for power. Consequently, the attainment of political power in Nigeria is through violent struggle, which cannot be undertaken by a person with light heart. Therefore, women have no heart to harbor thuggery and violence that accompany electioneering process in Nigeria.

Nigerian Former President Olusegun Obasanjo (2002) buttress the claim that "Nigerian politician do sometimes shed blood to achieve their relevance in government because political kingdom has for too long been the gate way to the economic kingdom" this statement captures the content and contest of political thuggery and violence in Nigeria. It demonstrates how blood is being exchange for political power and led to waste of human resources which resulted in the death of able-bodied men who may be useful in the future for national development. Without doubt, Nigerian politics has since independence, been characterized by thuggery and violence which average Nigerian women politician may likely find it difficult to cope with (Obasanjo, 2002). Agbalajobi (2010) believed that women tend to display complacency in the way of doing things. Therefore, they prefer to remain where they are and maintain the status quo than to be engulfed with crises and violence in the process of making a change. This attitude cannot ensure adequate participation of women in Nigeria politics. This is because of the perpetual fear in their mind.

## **Conclusion**

The problems militating against women political participation in Nigeria have been examined. The paper has proved that political thuggery and violence perpetuated by politician towards making everlasting relevance politically encourages them to device series of means of perpetuating themselves in office. The paper revealed that Nigerian politician can go to any length to achieve their political desires which made them engages in thuggery, harassment and intimidation of their opponents in political contest including women. This eventually resulted to the low level of participation of women in political activities in Nigeria because of the intimidation and harassment that may accompany such involvement.

The paper revealed that through thuggery and political violent, Nigerian women have been scared in political contests and this act needs urgent redemption. Nigerian government should as a matter of fact, curb all acts of thuggery and violence associated with Nigerian politics in order to give room for free, fair and credible elections that may stimulate women involvement in politics in Nigeria. The programme like women for change initiative, women empowerment programmes and other related political education programmes should be drastically initiated to promote Nigerian women involvement in political activities in Nigeria. Finally, with good governance and enduring democratic political culture if initiated by government can engender peace, orderliness, and eschews thuggery and violence in Nigeria's political landscape this can eventually increase the rate at which Nigerian women can actively participate in politics in the foreseeable future in Nigeria.

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