



## **YOUTH AND GENDER INCLUSIVITY IN POLITICS: THE PARADIGM SHIFT TO BUILDING A LIVABLE, MODERN AND DEVELOPED NATION**

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### **Abstract**

*Since the emergence of the present fourth republic democratic dispensation on May 29, 1999, one significant phenomenon and apparently that which has turned out to have become the hallmark of politics in Nigeria is the predominance and recycling of the same mainly old male politicians to the overwhelmingly near exclusion of youths and women. From the office of the president to the national assembly down to the states and even local councils, the evidence is glaring that most of the political offices are gradually being turned into retirement homes for persons who have little or no innovative ideas to offer towards transforming the polity. Thus, there seems to be a deliberate policy of youth and women exclusion in Nigeria politics. It was against the above backdrop that the 'not too young to run bill' was initiated and eventually passed by the National Assembly; but despite that, in reality nothing has changed, thereby giving more cause for concern as the country continues to wallow in poor governance induced by inept leadership; terrorism and threats of insecurity against the country's sovereignty and much more. Confronted by these challenges, and in the quest to contribute to already existing body of knowledge, this study lends credence to the clarion calls for a paradigm shift towards youth and gender inclusivity in politics as a leeway towards building a livable, modern and developed Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** youth, gender, inclusivity, politics, paradigm shift, modern, developed nation

### **Introduction**

There are over 1.8 billion young people aged 10-24 in the world, the largest youth population ever. Of these, 600 million are adolescent girls and young women (UNFPA, 2014). Across the world, young people especially women continue to face gender-based discrimination, marginalization, and violence, including unequal access to education and opportunities for leadership and participation. It is thus imperative that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development should deliver equal gains for youth and women in political leadership and decision making. The force and inspiration of our youngest leaders are critical drivers for accelerating progress on sustainable development and gender equality. UN Women's new youth and gender equality strategy seeks to empower young women and young men as partners in achieving gender equality, and aims to 'engender' the youth movement and 'enyouth' the women's movement (UN Women Global Innovation Coalition for Change, 2018). Sequel to the above, and building on UN Women's Strategic Plan, the Youth and Gender Equality Strategy, Nwachukwu et al (2018) highlighted its frameworks to include three thematic pillars:



*Leadership of young women in all spheres; Economic empowerment and skills development of young women; and Action on ending violence against young women and girls; ... and three cross-cutting approaches: strengthening Participation, voice and partnerships with young women and young women-led organizations and networks, with young men as partners of gender equality, and with inter-generational partners.*

Furthermore, democracy, human rights and governance assistance programs involving youth can be examined through sub-sectors, such as participation in elections, involvement in political parties, civic engagement, and others (Nwachukwu et al. 2018). However, it is important for all youth democracy, human rights and governance assistance programs to account for broader dynamics associated with politics, power and socio-cultural norms as they relate to youth civic and political participation, regardless of the type of assistance being delivered. These programs should include resources that can assist young people in overcoming barriers to their political participation and transforming power structures to attain meaningful political influence and bring about fundamental changes in leadership and development.

More so, bearing in mind that democracy is a process that brings more people into the arena of authoritative decision making and decision enforcement and not a destination so to say, therefore, any action, event, structure among other things that encourage the participation of more diverse people in a heterogeneous society in the process of decision making and enforcement in a polity should be considered a pro-democratic process. Hence, democracy is consolidated when a process, action, function, structure and event gives more people (including youths and women), the right to authoritative decision making in a polity. This is what could be termed, politics of inclusion. It is in this regard that the clamour by youths and women to be allowed more political space in the decision making process in Nigeria in particular should be comprehended. In Nigeria, youths and women, over the centuries had suffered from copious non-inclusion in the political machineries of state. Therefore, the rationale of this study which is built on the clamour by youths and women to be equitably included in the political space in the Nigerian polity is justifiable.

Furthermore, as aptly captured under international best practices, both men and women should have equal rights and opportunities to everything worldwide, most especially to participate fully in all aspects and at all levels of the political processes. Lending credence to the above, Nwachukwu, et al (2018) asserted that:

*Globally, women constituted over half of the world's population and contribute in vital ways to societal development generally.... Women are known to assume some key roles in society which are: mothers, producers,*



*home-managers, and community organizers, socio-cultural and political activists.*

Moreover, there are also prevailing arguments on why there should be more women in the political decision making process of states. These arguments range from; the claim for justice, women's interest claim, the rights claim, and the added value claim (Curtin, 2016). This paper therefore, is a wakeup call to action by all stakeholders; parliaments, governments, political parties, international organizations, civil society groups and the media to galvanize momentum for youths and gender inclusivity in politics, recognizing and understanding specific challenges faced by youths and women in engaging in political leadership, as well as sharing experiences and building capacity, and identifying strategic solutions as a paradigm shift to building a livable, modern and developed nation.

### **Objective of the study**

The main objective of this study was to interrogate the issue of youth and gender inclusivity in politics as a paradigm shift to building a livable, modern and developed nation. To this extent the following specific objectives are addressed;

1. To interrogate the rationale and situation analysis of youth and gender inclusivity in politics;
2. To determine the challenges to youth and gender inclusivity in politics; and
3. To ascertain the imperative of youth and gender inclusivity in politics as a necessary condition to building a livable, modern and developed nation.

### **Methodology**

This paper used exploratory design. Exploratory design fits where a situation has a deviant character. However, the goal of exploratory design is to discover ideas and insights. This study employed the exploratory design in order to provide better understanding of the failure of the Nigerian polity to mainstream youths and women into politics in Nigeria. In addition to the exploratory design, this paper employed qualitative method in its data collection and analyses. Qualitative approach emphasizes meanings (words) rather than frequencies and distributions (numbers) when collecting and analyzing data. In the main, qualitative approach seeks to understand and interpret the meaning of situations or events from the perspectives of the people involved and as understood by them; in this instance relying absolutely on documented evidence.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopted the Theory of Change (ToC) as expounded by Oxfam Australia (2001), which explores what needs to happen in order for young active citizens, institutions and communities to create positive, equitable and sustainable change together. This meta-theory was developed through a series of workshops which brought together various



stakeholders from around the world, including young people working in civil society, youth activists, Oxfam staff, Oxfam partners, in-country programming staff and young people from communities in which Oxfam works. This Theory of Change has identified three crucial paths or strategies for supporting youth active citizenship to enable collective impact, including: Young women and young men participate in decision making in affected communities; young women and young men from different regions and fields are organizing and taking collective action; and young women and young men participate in formal decision-making in institutions.

This theory in relation to the present study establishes a basic foundation for understanding youth civic purpose as a construct for learning about civic development in adolescence. The former defined as a sustained intention to contribute to the national polity beyond the self through civic or political action, integrates the components of motivation, civic activity, and future-oriented civic intention.

### **Definition of Terms**

The application of the term youth in this context connotes an adolescent or a young adult perhaps not exceeding the age of 40. Thus, there is a common saying that youths are the leaders of tomorrow, but no specifics as to when the tomorrow will come. Besides the term youth, gender is another keyword in this study. Gender is a variable that defines the nature of a person in terms of masculine or feminine (male or female). Gender expectations and messages bombard us constantly. Upbringing, culture, peers, community, media and religion are some of the many influences that shape our understanding of this core aspect of identity. How an individual learns and interacts with gender as a young child directly influences how the person views the world today.

Inclusivity, in its very definition, simply means to be open to everyone and not limited to certain people, no matter the gender. In regard to gender, this means that services, establishments, schools, practitioners, government agencies, and other institutions are welcoming of all people, regardless of their gender identity or expression. Because of its prominence in everyday life, creating gender inclusive environments in which everyone is welcome is critical to the success and development of a nation like Nigeria. We can help to create gender inclusive environments and communities by demonstrating support through actively opposing gender discrimination in politics, economics and socio-cultural life. Moving from the notion of gender as a binary concept to a more expansive understanding of the complex nature of the gender spectrum only occurs with a concerted effort by all adult stakeholders and allies.

We talk about gender inclusiveness because gender affects everyone. To truly flourish and thrive, all individuals need to feel welcome, included, and to live as their full, authentic selves.



In the light of the above, Lovenduski and Norris (2013) assert that gender inclusion is a concept that transcends mere equality. It's the notion that all services, opportunities, and establishments are open to all people and that male and female stereotypes do not define societal roles and expectations. While the United States has made dramatic strides in narrowing the gap between the sexes, statistics show that prevalent challenges exist, and we must address and eradicate them before our society can achieve true gender inclusion. Promoting gender inclusion through the creation of demonstrative examples of the concept in action is of the utmost importance as we strive toward this goal.

### **Youth and Gender Inclusivity in Politics: Rationale and Situation Analysis**

Globally, the last two decades saw slow progress in youths and women's political participation and leadership. According to Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2020) data, the share of parliamentary seats held by women increased from 11.3 per cent in 1995 to 25 per cent in 2020, still far from achieving gender parity. Only 6.6 per cent of Heads of State and only 6.2 per cent of Heads of Government are women and the proportion of women ministers stands at 21.3 per cent. Twenty-five years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, which set the international target for reaching gender equality in political decision-making, women are still underrepresented across all levels of political leadership and gender equality in politics is still a long way out of reach (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2020).

Young women are the least represented in leadership positions. Thus IPU (2020) data on youth participation in parliaments show that only 2.2 per cent of parliamentarians are under 30 years of age and less than 1 per cent are young women parliamentarians. Young women have an inalienable right to be represented when laws are adopted, budgets negotiated and governments held to account. Therefore, their exclusion from these processes is a violation of this right and undermines the valuable contributions they bring for the good of all people today and for the good of future generations. Their participation in formal politics is especially important as young women are strong and powerful leaders in many related fields, including in civic and democratic engagement on issues such as climate change, racism and gender equality, among others (David, 2011). David further maintains that young women are also powerful influencers across issues for youth in general and people of other generations. And they are powerful advocates for intergenerational collaboration and accountability towards a more just, sustainable and equal world for all. It will benefit us all therefore, to have more young people, in all their diversity, represented when political decisions for the future are being made.

The UN-Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) states that;

*Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace.*



Nearly three decades after, however, structural, socioeconomic, institutional and cultural barriers still prevent youths and worse still women from benefitting from equal political participation and leadership in comparison to men. In the case of young women, these barriers are reinforced by intersecting discriminations, based on sexual orientation, gender identity and age in particular. At a time when the global community is finding new and innovative ways of ensuring popular and inclusive democratic participation, third world countries and indeed Africa and Nigeria in particular still remains in limbo. The political participation of the youths; especially young women is not only a right that must be fulfilled, but it is also the smartest investment for our collective future. Civic and political participation must be nurtured during the formative years in young people's lives, starting in childhood and continuing through adolescence and into young adulthood. Political aspirations should be nurtured from early age. In the course of this period, young people build self-confidence and learn the value of their voices in taking up their inherent rights to actively engage in social and political life. These attributes can be attained through quality education; civic education and engagement; activism and youth parliaments (Nelson, 2018).

In the submission of Nelson (2018) therefore, gender inclusivity in politics requires holistic approach, which involves;

*Ensuring accessible, quality education for young men and women, and supporting youth employment, vocational training, entrepreneurship and financial services, such as youth empowerment banks and micro financing initiatives, all contribute to empowering youths and women broadly and to informing and supporting their interest and engagement in politics. An increase in youth and women's political participation can be achieved through measures such as youth and gender legislation, budget allocation and legislative oversight of the design and implementation of gender-responsive youth policies and programmes.*

While quality education equips future aspirants with the necessary knowledge and capacities, civic education opens up their perspectives as future leaders. It helps them to gain the necessary skills and competencies, enabling them to acknowledge their roles as citizens and exercise their rights and obligations, and paving the way for their civic engagement. The opportunities for participation that girls and young women experience in their communities may influence their development and the choices they make in their transition to adulthood. Young women should have early exposure to political and decision-making spaces. For example, one form of such engagement can be facilitated by Youth Parliaments. They prepare youth for the decision making process, build their capacities in debating, communication and leadership, and familiarize them with electoral systems, the significance of parliament as an institution, the democratic processes and political leadership from a young age. Social movements, civil society organizations and networks, for example those focused on peace building, democratic transition and gender





equality are often led by young people and could pave the way for their access to formal politics. These movements can and should be steppingstones for engagement in formal political processes and leadership. They form a pool of talents, experiences and engagement into which senior and older political leaders need to tap to recruit more young men and women as aspirants to elected office (European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) 2009).

But all too often, this participation is manifested only in the streets – or on social media – and not in formal political bodies as well. The reasons are multifaceted, but differing understandings of power and societal change, intergenerational mistrust and lack of transparency have often been attributed part of the blame. Political structures and institutions are not successful in sufficiently including young men and women in the political system and harnessing the wealth of expertise and drive for positive change inherent in civil society movements. This inaction not only leads to the marginalization of young people’s perspectives and representation in formal politics, and their loss of confidence and trust in democratic institutions, but is also a missed opportunity for society to benefit from the precious resources young women bring: the ideas, talents, expertise, knowledge and energy.

### **Challenges to Youth and Gender Inclusivity in Politics**

Young men and women seeking for political office face several unique barriers, one specifically relating to funding. In Nigeria today the glittering reality is that the irreducible fact is that politics and contest for public office has become capital intensive. Money politics is the order of the day. To pick nomination and expression of interest form alone within the political party has become a multi-million-naira venture; and unfortunately, young men and women do not have the wherewithal and financial muscle to compete effectively with the older politicians. The older politicians have been in the corridor of power for longer time and have had access to public funds mostly through corrupt self-aggrandizement.

More so, campaigning in Nigeria can be expensive and the lack of predictable and sustainable funding for young men and women often creates insurmountable barriers in competing for elective seats. Limits placed on campaign spending would level the playing field for young newcomers facing older, better-funded incumbents. Such an approach can also improve the situation for other underrepresented groups, including women of all ages. Alternatively, parties could allocate more targeted funds to young men and women candidates and thus encourage them to run for political offices. Women and men have different levels and types of political support networks. On average, female politicians receive fewer private donations than their male counterparts and rely more heavily on party sponsorship. Widespread societal gender-bias, portrayal in the media and voter perceptions of ‘a woman’s place’ cast a long shadow over young women’s decision to run for office and their opportunities for pursuing higher positions.



According to Inter-Parliamentary Union (2020);

*Redressing young women's under-representation in political life calls for political will and commitment, strong policy measures and multi-stakeholder partnerships. We should not let 2020 be the year of a global pandemic only but make it the year of substantial progress towards full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action with and for young women.*

Political parties are the principal platforms for candidates to participate in elections, so their proactive support in establishing and maintaining effective youth wings is vital. Political parties can do more for promoting young men and women's political aspirations, such as allocating central party resources to the support of young aspirants, establishing rules regarding their participation in party leadership bodies, and using youth wings more actively as a resource in recruiting young men and women candidates. Governments, parliaments and political parties seeking to enhance the participation and the role of youths in politics should make it a priority to address the discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and age that young people face.

In countries where there is high gender disparity in political participation, quotas have proven to be useful measures to mitigating underrepresentation, especially when they are ambitious, well designed and include stringent sanctions in case of non-compliance (Norris, 2015). Quota system that enhances youth participation and gender electoral inclusivity offers greater benefit to young women. A way to ensure this is to introduce age provisions in gender electoral quotas and gender provisions in youth electoral quotas. Another set of challenges that hamper youth and women involvement in politics are violence, sexual harassment and bullying. These challenges are faced disproportionately by women in politics and young women in particular aspiring to elective offices. To enhance gender inclusivity therefore, it is imperative that the legislature and other institutions have to exercise zero tolerance of sexual harassment and violence against women by adopting and implementing adequate policies and mechanisms, establishing an independent, confidential and fair complaints handling mechanism, and raising awareness of politicians and other stakeholders to that effect. To the above extent therefore, IPU (2018) pungently asserts;

*Sexism and gender stereotypes, as well as a common focus by male counterparts and the media on a young woman's appearance, her marital status and other personal matters rather than on her ideas, experiences and political views, are fundamentally damaging. In addition, during election campaigns, women – and young women in particular – are under-represented in news coverage or on political talk shows. Traditionally, media portrays the image of women as having less political agency and fail to treat their candidacy objectively.*





These challenges no doubt are often exacerbated by social media. Cyber bullying remains a source of fear and political disengagement for many young women. Negative advertising and the risk of loss of privacy can discourage young women and keep them out of active politics. Capacity building for young women candidates is crucial before and during the election process. Targeted training should be designed to develop young women's skills for campaigning, campaign management, communication, public speaking and advocacy, but also for curbing attacks and reacting to discrimination, sexism and harassment. This training can be complemented by mentorship activities involving experienced women leaders and party leaders.

Political will is pivotal to advancing and supporting young men and women's access to elective offices and their participation in politics. Strong commitments from decision-makers can provide more opportunities, pathways and power for youths and women's participation, and ensure more young women rise to political leadership (IPU, 2018).

### **Youth and Gender Inclusivity in Politics: The Paradigm Shift Imperative to Building a Livable, Modern and Developed Nation**

To ensure youth and gender inclusivity, a paradigm shift should be a categorical imperative. This will fundamentally require that political institutions, including the legislature and political parties, should be gender-sensitive and gender responsive, towards the specific needs and interests of young men and women. These institutions should prioritize internal policies that ensure that young men and women have access to leadership positions even if it is by quota or affirmative action. More so, in the interest of the women there should be family-friendly political environments, where young men and women find that their needs to live as well as work are taken into account. Indubitably, gender-inclusivity in politics will promote a more modern, dynamic institution that fully reflect the populations they serve; the culture of the political institutions with respect to gender equality will need to take into account gender-sensitive language, customs, dress codes and working hours.

Pursuant to the above, Harrison (2011) affirmed that;

*There is need to proactively reach out to, consult and engage young men and women, particularly the most disadvantaged. Such proactive outreach should be targeted at engaging young people in their own spaces, for example on social media, in schools, universities and other public spaces. Collaboration with social movements at the grassroots level is an invaluable opportunity to ensure diverse representation of young persons in democratic institutions.*

As an addendum, it is equally germane to ensure that young men and women's engagement with political institutions is meaningful, and not tokenistic as presently evident in the Nigerian political scenario. This includes their access to decision-making and leadership



positions. In the legislature, young people should be trusted to chair committees, initiate or co-sponsor legislations or bills; have equal opportunities for professional development, training and networking; and be part of international delegations and deliberations.

To further harness the potentials of young men and women towards building a livable, modern and developed Nigeria, the submission of Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women is apt here, Mlambo-Ngcuka (2017) maintained that;

*Establishment of women and youth caucuses and forums in the legislature can serve as important mechanisms for young people to ensure that they benefit from this nexus and that it serves their ideals, policy agendas and aspirations (towards a more modern democratic Nigeria). Encouraging young women legislators to work together can strengthen their political impact to achieving greater equality and help change laws and policies that are outdated and unproductive.*

Around the world, therefore, there abound substantial evidence that young men and women are leading with courage, resilience, innovation and creativity; these are exactly the skills needed to institutionalize through their greater political participation in order to emerge from the present crisis and sustainably build a more equal, livable and modern Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations therefore are apt for policy;

1. There is need for government at all levels to launch structured dialogue with civil society as inclusive, transparent and effective channels for ensuring that political institutions and their mandates are responsive to social needs and for promoting reforms that are sensitive to the aspirations and abilities of young persons to effect change.
2. The government should rejig relevant laws to ensure the meaningful inclusion of young men and women in politics for the effective galvanization of transformative change.
3. The media should do well to unveil objective stories featuring and profiling young men and women in politics and their achievements.
4. Relevant amendments should be effected in our laws to align the minimum age of eligibility for political office with the voting age.

### **Conclusion**

In all intents and purposes this paper has explored the critical issue of youth and gender inclusivity in politics. A number of grey issues have been raised and analyzed. Suffice therefore to say that inclusivity in politics remains a categorical imperative in transforming the polity. Cognizant of the deficit in youth and women involvement in governance, there is urgent need for the ruling class in Nigeria in particular to sincerely eliminate all iron



curtains barring youth and women participation in politics thereby opening the political space for the inclusion of more youths and women into the decision making process of Nigeria. To achieve this, need for an electoral reform in Nigeria is exigent so as to make the political process more transparent, all embracing, less expensive and more peaceful. All said and done, youth and gender inclusivity in politics will no doubt provide the most feasible and plausible good governance alternative to the current practice in Nigeria where the same old faces with little or no innovative ideas keep holding the nation to ransom with inept leadership. This study therefore submits that there should be deliberate policy implementation to ensure in the first instance 30% gender inclusiveness as proposed by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, as well as the Nigerian National Gender Policy (NGP) which recommended 35% affirmative action instead.

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