

Women in Nigeria make up 49 per cent of the population, but only four per cent of lawmakers

If Nigeria is to achieve the sustainable development goal of ensuring gender equality in the political and business arena, there is a lot of work to be done. LSE alumna Nwamaka Ogbonna has a checklist for the government, private sector and civil society.

Women make up about 49 per cent of the Nigerian population and nearly one out of four women in sub-Saharan Africa is a Nigerian. While this presents potential human resources that can be harnessed to enhance economic productivity; the disparities in social and economic opportunities between men and women have never been starker. Nigeria has the lowest number of female parliamentarians in sub-Saharan Africa and ranks 133rd in the world for female political representation. Women own only 20 per cent of enterprises in the formal sector and only 11.7 per cent of Board Directors in the country are women. Although it must be acknowledged that the country has made some progress in closing the gender gap in certain areas ie primary school enrollment rates, gender equality still remains in a deplorable state and these statistics reveal that there is still so much work to be done.



Participants at the 2015 WIMBIZ Annual Conference Photo credit: WIMBIZ.org

I therefore argue that if Nigeria is to meet the sustainable development goal of “*ensuring women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life*”, there is an urgent need to adopt a more holistic approach to the inclusion of women that comprise various stakeholders in society. The government has to take the lead by championing initiatives and implementing policies that advance the cause of women while the private sector should adopt codes of conduct which strongly acknowledge the need for gender diversity. Civil society on the other hand has the responsibility of holding the government and private sector accountable as well as embarking on initiatives to enlighten and empower women.

The need for government to be at the forefront of the fight for gender equality can never be overemphasised. In Canada, for instance, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau sent a strong signal of his commitment by creating a cabinet with an equal number of men and women. By contrast, Nigeria’s President Muhammadu Buhari missed this strategic opportunity as only 16 per cent of his cabinet members are women. This is in violation of the national gender policy which requires a

minimum of 35 per cent female representation on the President's cabinet. In addition to this, only 7 out of the 109 Senate seats and 14 out of the 360 House of Representative seats are occupied by women. Clearly, there is a conspicuous and appalling absence of women at the country's highest levels of decision-making despite mounting evidence that countries where women are engaged in the public sector tend to prioritise issues such as health and education which are vital to overall economic development. From the foregoing, it might be useful to examine some of the constraints faced by women in Nigeria's political environment.

Violence and intimidation of both voters and candidates during elections has been a huge constraint to women's participation in politics. Although it declined in certain regions during the 2015 elections, it still remains a serious problem and a disincentive to women. To reduce the repetition of electoral violence, it might be prudent to prosecute both its instigators and perpetrators as this might serve as a deterrent to potential offenders.

Women's political participation has also been grossly undermined by the predominance of a powerful class of male political elite who have historically run the political system. This reduces the chances of women being nominated at the party level, much less winning the elections. Evidence from South Africa and Rwanda (where more than half of the parliamentarians are women) have shown that until women are nominated at the party level to contest winnable seats, it might be impossible to attain equal political representation in the short-term. Therefore Nigerian political parties may consider incorporating quota systems into their constitutions to encourage female participation. The legislature on the other hand should also consider passing into law the 35 per cent minimum female representation in the cabinet as per the national gender policy. Although quotas alone may not be sufficient, they provide a good starting point.

In business, there is an apparent deficit of women in the formal sector (they make up only 20 per cent) as the majority are located in the informal sector. This is partly explained by women's limited access to finance; as a matter of fact men are twice as likely to access finance compared to women, despite various research showing that women are more likely to repay loans. This inability to access finance is partly accounted for by their lack of property rights which hinder them from providing the collateral needed for loans. Despite the attempt to strengthen their property rights via the Land Administration Act, land ownership remains dependent on a patrilineal inheritance system that ensures land is passed from fathers to male descendants. To put this in context, women own only 4 per cent of land in the North-East and just over 10 per cent in the South-South and South-East. While there is an obvious need for relevant institutions to implement this law to enhance women's access to finance; financial institutions also need to make their products more gender sensitive. Schemes such as Keystone Bank's 'Pink Account' and Access Bank's W initiatives which provide special loans and credit facilities to women are some good examples.

Gender parity in the corporate sector is a global challenge and Nigeria is not an exception to this. Even though the number of women in the corporate sector have increased over time, they still face the proverbial glass ceiling as there is a paucity of women in senior executive positions and on company boards (only 11.7 % of board directors in the country are women). Often, this is due to the opaque board nomination process usually done through informal networks such as old boys association or men's social clubs which obviously puts women at a disadvantage. In addition to this, most companies are unaware of the benefits of a gender diverse board; research has shown that there is a positive correlation between women in senior corporate roles and a company's financial performance.

Some countries have been able to increase women's representation on boards through constitutional reforms and the adoption of new policies. Kenya for instance increased women's representation on boards from 2.5 per cent in 2010 to 20 per cent in 2012 as a result of the 2010 constitution which mandated that not more than two-thirds of board members in state-owned enterprises or in firms where the government's stake is more than half, should be of the same gender. Similarly, in 2003 Norway imposed a gender quota requiring at least 40 per cent of board members in publicly listed companies to be women; this target was met in two years. Nigerian



companies can also play their part by instituting procedures which make the board nomination process more transparent and actively solicit applications from qualified women.

Non-governmental organisations also have a major role to play in the fight for more inclusive boards. WIMBIZ (Women in Management, Business and Public Service) is a non-profit that has been at the forefront of the advocacy for equal opportunities for women in the corporate sector. In 2011, they published the first ever data on female Directors in Nigeria where it was shown that of the 190 listed companies, only 10.5 per cent of board seats were held by women. WIMBIZ's activities include assisting women to apply for board positions, providing mentorship and sponsorship for high potential women and organising high-level conferences where women can network with successful professionals in various industries. In 2015, one of WIMBIZ's founding trustees Mrs Ibukun Awosika was appointed as the first female Chairperson of the Board of Directors of First Bank Nigeria PLC, one of Nigeria's largest Banks. We therefore need more organisations of this nature to strengthen the voice of women.

Finally, civil society groups have the important role of putting pressure on government to implement policies that promote gender parity ie the national gender policy and calling on companies to incorporate gender diversity into their codes of conduct. They can also embark on campaigns to make politics safer and inclusive of women as a means of encouraging female political participation.

In conclusion, if Nigeria is truly serious about attaining inclusive and sustainable development, gender equality needs to be brought to the fore of the government's agenda and seen as a high priority issue by companies and civil society. In the words of CCTV Anchor Tian Wei "any society that fails to harness the energy and creativity of its women is at a huge disadvantage in the modern world".

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The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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