**FEMALE ENGAGEMENT IN GOVERNANCE: CHALLENGES AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES**

By

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**OUTLINE OF PRESENTATION AT POWER WEB DIALOGUE IN COMMEMORATION OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY ON 10TH MARCH, 2021.**

1. **INTRODUCTION**

It has been established that the development of any country requires the participation of both men and women. Unfortunately, women have been historically marginalized in all areas including social, economic and political spheres.

The status of women across the world today is precarious. About 70 percent of the 1.3 billion people living in extreme poverty are women.[[1]](#endnote-1) In developing countries, women own less than 2 percent of all land. At least 60 million girls are “missing” due to female infanticide or sex selective abortion and an estimated 5,000 women murdered each year in “honour” killings. There is unequal distribution of food and health care. 93 million children who are not enrolled in school are girls.

It has been documented that in Nigeria, women and girls suffer systematic disadvantage and discrimination that is magnified for those in the poorest states and sectors of society.[[2]](#endnote-2) As at 2012, Nigeria’s 80.2 million women and girls have significantly worse life chances than men and also their sisters in comparable societies. In Nigeria, 60-79 percent of the rural work force is women but men are five times more likely to own land. Women with dependants pay more tax than men. Women in formal employment are paid less than men. Nearly five times as many judges and permanent secretaries are men rather than women. Only 4 percent of local government councilors in 2012 are women. Up to one third of Nigerian women have been subjected to violence.[[3]](#endnote-3) In one word, there is gender inequality in the world. Female engagement in governance is unacceptably low.

1. **CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN ENAGEGMENT**

Over the years, the challenges facing women have been delineated. The Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action of 1995 identified 12 critical areas of concern to realize women’s rights:

1. Poverty
2. Education
3. Training
4. Health
5. Violence
6. Armed Conflict
7. Economy
8. Power and decision making
9. Institutional Mechanisms
10. Human Rights
11. Media
12. Environment and
13. The girl child

26 years later, intervention is all these areas is still required.

Studies have shown that when women are empowered, all of society benefits.[[4]](#endnote-4) In fact, countries on top of human development index such as the Scandinavian countries of Norway, Sweden, Netherlands etc have gender sensitive policies. Gender empowerment and women equality is not a favour done to women. Neither is it good politics. It benefits society as a whole.

Several studies have shown that women empowerment and gender equality are necessary for women to realize their rights. According to Kenneth Wollack, President of National Democratic Institute:

Women’s meaningful participation in politics affects both the range of policy issues that are considered and the types of solutions that are proposed. Research indicates that a legislator’s gender has a distinct impact on policy priorities, making it critical that women are present in politics to represent the concerns of women and other marginalized citizens and help improve the responsiveness of policy-making and governance. And as more women reach leadership positions within their political parties, these parties tend to prioritize issues that impact health, education and other quality of life issues. There is strong evidence that as more women are elected to office, there is also a corollary increase in policy-making that reflects the priorities of families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities. Women’s political participation has profound positive and democratic impacts on communities, legislatures, political parties, and citizen’s lives. In places as diverse as Timor-Leste, Croatia, Morocco, Rwanda and South Africa, an increase in the number of female lawmakers led to legislation related to antidiscrimination, domestic violence, family codes, inheritance, and child support and protection.

…..Women lawmakers tend to see “women’s” issues more broadly as social issues, possibly as a result of the role that women have traditionally played as mothers and caregivers in their communities; and more women see government as a tool to help serve underrepresented or minority groups. Women lawmakers, therefore, have often been perceived as more sensitive to community concerns and more responsive to constituency needs.

Women are deeply committed to peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction and have a unique and powerful perspective to bring to the negotiating table. Women often suffer disproportionately during armed conflict and often advocate most strongly for stabilization, reconstruction and the prevention of further conflict. Peace agreements, post-conflict reconstruction and governance have a better chance of long-term success when women are involved.[[5]](#endnote-5)

1. **OPPORTUNITIES TO PUSH FOR FEMALE ENGAGEMENT**

It is therefore important that the necessary condition should be created for women to realize their rights. Scholars are in agreement that in order for women to realize their rights, there is the need to address structural inequalities that constrain women.[[6]](#endnote-6) This can be done by:

1. **Increasing women’s access to, control over and benefit from basic assets** such as land, water, forest resources and capital. At the core of this issue are power and policy: learning how to address these two factors is the key to bringing about equitable and sustainable development;
2. **Enabling women to have more say in community affairs and at higher political levels.**

Opening avenues for women’s representational role in decision-making bodies implies facilitating the right of association and expression, building awareness of women's rights, questioning gender stereotypes, and facilitating women's participation by ensuring the provision of basic services. It may also require positive action, such as reserving places for women in decision-making bodies;

1. **Advocating and coordinating efforts to increase investments in basic rural infrastructure and services,** particularly water, health and education – limited access to which places a special burden on poor women and girls.
2. **Gaining men’s support for women's empowerment**. Consciousness-raising among men has to go hand in hand with women’s mobilization and group formation. The achievement of gender equality is not the sole responsibility of marginalized women: men and political leaders (both men and women) must also be engaged as champions of equality and women’s empowerment.[[7]](#endnote-7)
3. **CONCLUSION**

The development of any [[8]](#endnote-8)country requires the participation of both men and women. But women have been historically marginalized in all areas including social, economic and political spheres. The socio-economic status of Nigeria is precarious with women suffering more than men.

It has been shown by several studies that when women are empowered, the whole of society benefits. Similarly, it has been proven that women can realize their rights by addressing structural inequalities that constrain women. This can be done by increasing women’s access to control over and benefit from basic assets such as land, water, forest resources and capital; enabling women to have say in community affairs and higher political levels; advocating and co-ordinating efforts to increase investment in basic rural infrastructure and services; and gaining men’s support for women’s empowerment.

Despite efforts in the past, little progress has been made on gender equality and women empowerment. There is therefore the need consider new strategies including women movement organizing, scale up of partnership with men, linkage to overall agenda to liberate the country from elite capture and framing the advocacy messages as beneficial to society as a whole and not favour done to women.

**ENDNOTES**

1. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. British Council (2012), Gender in Nigeria Report 2012 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Macedo, K (2010) Op Cit [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Wolllack, K(2010) Op Cit [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. IFAD (2003), Women as Agents of Change. Discussion Paper [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. IIbid [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. UN Women-Generation Equality: Realizing Women’s Rights for an equal future. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)