The Price of Deception:
African Women and Political Mobilisation

J.O. Fasoro

Department of Philosophy
Ekiti State University, Ado–Ekiti, Nigeria.

Abstract
The paper argues that rather than settling down to confront the challenge of the inequality of the sexes in Africa (and perhaps also in the so-called third world countries), African women elite class has been engaged in paying lip services to this politically and socially serious issue. Part of what the paper discovers as the bane of Africa women political emancipation is that these women themselves engage in self-deception through brainwashing which is meant to produce conformity rather than political emancipation of their class. The deception again, forms the bedrock of most of the so-called cultural values, since the belief in the sanctity of these values either promotes or undermines the collective interest of some people or group of persons. We adopt the conventional meaning of the word ‘emancipation’ in this paper. For instance, if people are emancipated, they are freed from unpleased or unfair social, political, or legal restrictions. This is the crux of the matter. In Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular, leaders as well as their so-called Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) have failed to truly emancipate the womenfolk so as to bridge the gap between men and women in social, economic, political, and legal matters. Having viewed the gender issue holistically, our searchlight is then beamed on Nigerian political terrain where, we argue, that despite the cacophony that has accompanied the wife of the president’s effort for ‘women emancipation’, it is discovered that rather than such effort being nationalistic, it is truly a self-motivated and self-directed lot. This study is significant in the sense that it affirms that the achievement of one’s goal in life is not determined by the person’s sex or gender, colour, or even country of origin, but on his or her potentials, both natural and acquired, and how such potentials are effectively put into use.

Keywords: affirmative action, brainwashing, culture, development, emancipation, empowerment, gender.

INTRODUCTION
One of the ways in which the equality of the sexes has been stoutly defended is to make reference to the holy books – the Bible and Quran. In the Bible (Genesis 2: 18 – 25), we get the story of how man was created in the image of God (Imago Dei), but a woman was created from that man. Also in the New Testament (11 Timothy 2: 11), the reader is educated on what is to be the respective roles of the husband and the wife! If Paul says women must remain silent in the church, and he claims to be speaking under divine (God’s) inspiration, why and how can anyone query what he says! Even if women are not allowed to go to the section of the church that is called ‘holy of the holies’, yet they may be permitted to clean and decorate such places!

It is not here argued that such Bible passages that support the superiority of men to women were responsible for the subjugation of women to men in Africa, cultural restrictions of women pre-dated Christianity and Islam. However, it is an undeniable fact that, in contemporary Africa, women activists, as well as feminists of different persuasions, are constantly reminded of whom they are, or more appropriately, whom they ought to be, and their position and role in the society, and this reminder is usually hinged on what the holy books say they are and their deference to men’s superiority and leadership. That is not all. These women are also reminded that whoever advocates equality of the sexes are anti-Christ. This religious belief and others like it which are held to be part of African cultural values (but which, indeed, are cultural barriers) are seen to be more sacred than, and superior to, any agitations for the promotion of feminist values.

We do not want to argue that the socio-cultural barriers identified so far are a monopoly of Africa (or Nigeria), but our argument is that, while other cultures of the world are making frantic efforts to modify, or even abolish some of these negative cultural beliefs, many African cultures (among which is Nigerian culture) still believe that adherence to them is what makes a good nation and virtuous women.

The importance of this study is that it will serve as an eye opener to African womenfolk that their number one enemy in the quest to attain equality with their male counterpart is their (African women’s) failure to challenge some, or indeed most, of the cultural beliefs that have hitherto worked against their collective interest.
THE PROBLEM STATEMENT
For African women to enjoy all-round equal treatment with their male counterpart, what they need to do is not to imitate men but to assert their humanity positively and stop seeing themselves as subservient to men.

African Women in the Throes of Culture
In most African cultures, barrenness for example, is seen as an abomination. Whenever a woman is found to be childless, she is believed to have done something mortally wrong and the gods and goddess are angry with her. In such a situation, the childless woman is not allowed to inherit the property of the late husband by the family members of the man, leaving the widow with almost nothing to live on for the rest of her life.

Among the Igbo people of South-east Nigeria, the manner in which prospective wives are ‘sold’ at exorbitant rates to their would-be husbands leaves much to be desired. This is the more reason why such women cannot readily and easily seek for divorce since they must pay back every kobo expended, and more often than not, the parents of the women may no longer have the financial muscle to pay back the huge amount of money. In contemporary Nigeria, it is often jovially said that, among the Igbo, all you need to become a millionaire is one of two daughters. Here too, instalment payments are allowed, and receipts are issued out for each payment made as if one is to believe that it is Cows that are being sold. However, it is argued in some quarters that such an arrangement as found among the Igbo promotes stability in the family, by which it is meant that as a result of the exorbitant prices paid on them, wives cannot readily seek for divorce since their parents are bound to return such daughters to their matrimonial homes with pleas to the husband. But even if this is true, it is at a cost. The cost is the mortgaging of freedom of women to make legitimate choices, that is, whether to continue with a no longer peaceful and happy marriage or to get out of it. Women are therefore treated as commodities for exchange. In this twenty-first century, one would think women’s exposure to education and civilization will stem the rate of this ugly and unwholesome cultural practice, but the higher the educational attainment of the Igbo woman, the higher the bride price demanded by her parent. Many of these potential wives themselves erroneously believe that the higher the bride price paid on them, the more valued they are.

Such cultural practices as discussed in the above few paragraphs which Africans regarded as part of their socio-cultural identity is, in fact, nothing short of the enslavement of women. This is more so since absolute compliance and conformity are seen as a mark of virtue. This is why feminist activists are mostly restricted to urban and heterogeneous centres, and they are sometimes faced with stiff oppositions even from within their rank and file. It is a fact that in Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular, most advocates of gender equality and women empowerment are really not in touch with their grassroot colleagues. The activities of the NGOs are restricted to city centres. The average African women hardly understand the mission of the so-called feminist groups and NGOs, not to talk of supporting them in whatever they take to be their goals and objectives. Advocates of gender equality in Africa are mostly those that can be referred to as ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘metropolitan’ women. The illiterate mass of women in the rural settings see themselves as custodians and defenders of the primordial African culture. Even though these rural women do not possess high level of formal education, yet they are aware of the fact that the “urban mobilisers” usually collect huge sums of money from their respective governments, none of which reaches the grassroot levels.

In addition, “gender equality” is not synonymous with holding a political office on equal or near equal basis between males and females. The fact that, African feminists concentrate more on sharing political offices to the neglect of the over-all development of the women, many people seem not to see any marked difference between the dirty politics of the developing nations of the world and certain groups’ advocacy for women empowerment.

Women Mobilisation: The Nigerian Experience
In the opening paragraphs of the paper, it was observed that women in Africa appeared not to be clear about what they are agitating for in their various movements and NGOs. The case of Nigerian women is even more pathetic. Nowadays the media have made it part of their program to feed the public with such slogans as the “affirmative action” “women for change”, “equality of sexes”, and so on, all with the aim of fighting for the right of women in the country. However, one is quick to add that, in Nigeria, women are their own enemies as far as emancipation is concerned. Perhaps a recent event in the political arena will better illustrate the points we are making here. Earlier (January 2011) the delegate congress (convention) of the so-called largest political party in Africa, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) took place at the Eagles Square in Abuja, Nigeria. The congress members assembled to vote for the presidential flag bearer of the party in April (2011) elections. There were three aspirants among whom one was to be elected. They were the incumbent president, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, the former vice president, Alhaji Atiku Abubarkar, and the only female, Mrs. Sarah Jubril. The election were held between Thursday 13th January 2011, and the early hours of Friday 14 January 2011. The results of the elections were later announced as follows: Dr.
Goodluck Ebele Jonathan 2,736 votes; Alhaji Atiku Abubarkar 805 votes; and Mrs. Sarah Jubril 1 vote. It should be stressed here that, Mrs. Jubril was making her third consecutive attempts at securing the ticket of her party. While she was criss-crossing the Nigerian political landscape, there were many women in her campaign train pretending to be her supporters. As we watch the live television coverage of that event, the only vote for Mrs. Jubril was by herself! The inference from that exercise was either that the Nigerian women did not believe that the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria could yet come from within their ranks, or that this woman (Mrs. Jubril) could not be that candidate. The numerical strength of Nigerian women which should have been used to make a statement at the party convention was thrown to the dogs, while women delegates voted massively for the two male contestants. Even the founder of “women for change and development initiative” the wife of the president Dame Patience Goodluck Jonathan, could not help matters! The deceptive cry of godfatherism in the Nigerian politics, which some see as the bane of women poor showing is, to say the least uncalled for. Why are we not, or can we not, talk to godmotherism in politics? Prior to this primaries, Patience Goodluck Jonathan has been going from one place to the other, especially claiming to be sensitising the womenfolk that their time had come, that women should not only be seen in the Nigerian politics, but that they must be heard and voted for. At the end, the Nigerian women were asked to vote for a male - Goodluck Jonathan that he was (not any woman) the one that could bring about the much desired change in Nigeria!

Shortly after the primaries in January, as well as the presidential elections in April, and with the emergence of Jonathan, this same group of women started agitating for the preservation of 35% (thirty-five percent) for women. In Yenegoa, capital of Bayelsa state, the home state of President Jonathan, women took to the street with placards of various inscriptions, shouting various slogans to express their anger for the marginalisation of the Nigerian women in the political matters in the country. It appeared this protesting women had forgotten their complacent attitude both in January and April elections. The anticipated change in the political world in Nigeria could only come not by begging the president’s wife to ask for some cabinet posts for women, but women themselves must take their political destiny in their own hands. The one time vibrant and vociferous women for change and development initiative of the wife of the president, an NGO once seen as the voice of women had since gone to sleep immediately the husband of its founder won the presidential elections.

Women for change and development initiative, is a bundle of double standard. Its principle seems to be: “yes, Nigerian women can do it (politics), but not when Goodluck Jonathan is still around and he is interested in politics”. It stands to reason, therefore, to say that Dame Patience Goodluck Jonathan was merely using her NGO to garner support for her husband’s presidential ambition. Only heavens know what would become of the NGO after the exit of President Jonathan inspire of billions of naira that may had been sunk into keeping it afloat for the public gaze. Over the years, Nigerians have seen the birth and subsequent death of so many deceptive NGOs that were floated by the wives of local government chairmen, governors, as well as presidents, all of which were meant to have their own share of national cake. It is a pity that contemporary Nigerian women for example, continued to make the mistake of confusing ceremonial jamboree with women mobilisation. Surely, the two are not identical. Parades, match past, dancing, and so on, at the stadia and other public places, by Nigerian women leaders, are not synonymous with political mobilisation. Women mobilisers must themselves be people who have passions for ideals and ideas. They cannot possibly be deceptive people who are out just to deceive people to vote for a particular set of politicians for monetary gains.

The Nigerians women should be wiser and be more politically alert. They must realise that the current trends in political mobilization is not fetching them the desired and required political recognitions. If in previous administrations, they always danced to honour political office holders and nothing came out of such public ceremonies, our women should be wiser if they are now called upon to do the same for a new administration,. The philosophy of many of the NGOs, geared towards women political emancipation, is wrong-headed. The gender issue as well as the affirmative action for securing a particular percentage of public office for women, if properly perceived, conceived and handled, must bother on human rights. If so, then, rather than seeing the present agitation for women’s participation in politics as a way of supporting particular candidates to win elections, it should be seen as a move to claim what rightly belongs to the womenfolk, namely, equality of opportunity in politics and political matters. Women in Nigeria need not hinge their political emancipation on the emotions and dispositions of the wife of the president or wives of governors and local government chairmen.

The danger in equating the political success of women with the support for particular candidates-males and females, is that even if these candidates win elections now, the chances are that they may lose in the future, such that the women that brought the defeated candidates to power may equally lose what they have gained under that regime. To fight for women emancipation in politics as well as other
spheres of life should be a matter of principle and should not be anchored on which government is in power. Nigerian women should realise that they are not having it good for now as far as politics is concerned in Nigeria irrespective of people or parties in power as the figure below shows:

(a) Out of 109 senate seats, there are 101 males and 8 females

(b) In the house of representatives, there are 360 seats, comprising of 333 males and 27 females.

Similarly, the issue of gender balancing should not be restricted to women having fair share in political office, but total emancipation in all local, regional and national distribution of goods and services, as well as human development.

CONCLUSION

In most African countries, the offices of the first ladies at the national, regional as well as local levels, an illegal and unconstitutional creation, have been used to secure budgetary allocations through which the wives of the political office holders have been able to use other-women as canon folders.

Most of the pet projects of those first ladies are claimed to be designed to alleviate the poor social status of women, but, in reality, they are conduit pipes for siphoning money from government. The wasteful nature of these projects could be seen from the fact that, as soon as the president, governor, or local government chairman concludes his tenure, or is voted out of office, that means the immediate death of the programme put in place by his wife. Wives of the newly elected political office holders would then ask for money to start their respective NGOs ‘that would cater for the needs of women’. This lack of continuity in policy formation and implantation has contributed immensely to lack of meaningful development in Africa.

African women need mass education (in whichever languages or media through which this can be prosecuted), and not fashion parade at public places. African women’s self-image, not beauty only, is what should be sold to the world at large. Individual achievement must be recognised and appreciated. Women in Africa, as in elsewhere, must shun pauperisation of any sort. As Eshete (1974:42) rightly observed.

A central feature of meaningful work is that it is autonomous. The fact that a piece of work bears the distinctive stamp of the worker is a source of the satisfaction found in it. Other things being equal, we take pride in work which displays. Our part in its making. The conditions of autonomy in productive work are numerous.

Rather than depending on the good-will of the wives of political office holders, African women must fight for their legitimate rights. This they can do successfully if they utilise their numerical strength in voting for females political office seekers. The limitation identified here is that the mass of the peoples of Africa who should constitute the engine room of women mobilisation are unfortunately non-literate. This problem notwithstanding, these sets of people would gradually be sensitised through the introduction of adult and non-formal mass education. President Helen Johnson – Sirleaf had blazed the trail in Liberia. African women must realise that nothing good comes easily, and that male ‘grantors’ of some selected political offices to womenfolk, may, at their convince, withdraw what was so granted.*

REFERENCES


