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BEYOND WEARING '*ASO-EBI':* WOMEN'S CANDIDACY, POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
Usually, periods of political transitions offer opportunities to political parties as electoral gatekeepers to promote gender inclusiveness. Surprisingly however, despite the increased advocacy for more inclusion of women as political leaders, especially after the 2019 elections, an examination of the statistics of female candidates that ran for political offices in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria remained very low, when compared with the figures of male candidates. The intention in this paper is therefore to closely examine the major political parties in Nigeria, assess the structures and mechanisms that they put in place to allow for the participation and increased engagement of women as political candidates, beyond their wearing "aso-ebi" which literally means "uniform dress code to show solidarity" and mobilizing them as voters. To break the patterns of gender exclusion, this paper draws insights from political parties in Africa and recommends among others, the adoption of voluntary quotas by parties just as done in some of these countries, to increase the political representation of women in Nigeria. The paper concludes on the note that the empowerment of women leaders to incorporate issues related to women's concerns in party manifestoes, in addition to identifying, encouraging and recommending potential candidates across all levels to the party leadership for recruitment and fielding for political offices will enhance the candidacy of females.

Key words: women's candidacy, political parties, elections, Nigeria

Introduction

Women in Nigeria constitute about half of the country's population and they play significant roles in all spheres of society. Despite the significant roles they play, which often times go unacknowledged, they face discrimination in political spaces. The Nigerian constitution provides for the rights of women to vote and be voted for, just like their male counterparts, but they remain marginalized in political decision making positions. There are advocacy efforts by local women's movements in the country, demanding at least 35 percent representation for women on the political terrain as stipulated by the National Gender Policy. It is believed that this minimum of 35 percent representation is a pre-requisite for the impact of women's presence in political leadership to be felt.

Despite the advocacy for the reservation of 35 percent of seats for women in appointive and elective positions, law makers in the National Assembly rejected the gender equality bills in 2022. Political parties provide avenues for citizens to participate in the political affairs of their countries. In modern representative democracies, political parties link government and citizens; and also provide platforms for the recruitment of candidates for elections. For political parties to function effectively, they must put in place structures that will promote the political engagements of the populace. To ensure gender inclusiveness and especially give room for the participation and representation of women, the policies, structures and processes of political parties have a huge impact. Studies have however shown that women encounter challenges which restrict their participation in political parties' nomination processes, especially as candidates for elective office (Brechenmacher & Hubbard, 2020; Gatto & Wylie, 2022; Ugwu & Okoye, 2022; Wang, Muriaas & Bauer, 2023). Other challenges could be gender based political violence which could take physical, verbal, sexual or psychological forms (Krook, 2017; 2019). Despite these challenges, for political parties, periods of political transitions allow for breaking these restrictive patterns to promote gender inclusiveness.

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election which held on 25 February and the federal elections conducted on 18 March have made it important to examine the engagement of women as political

candidates. This paper therefore assesses the structures and mechanisms put in place by major political parties in Nigeria, to allow for greater participation of women as political candidates and draws insights from other political parties in Africa, that have broken the patterns of gender exclusion.

Women's Political Leadership in Nigeria

Although advocacy to close gender gaps in politics have heightened over the years, a close examination of the statistics of women in political offices in Nigeria reveal that women are still marginalized. In this section, statistics showing the representation of women in political leadership positions from 1999 when the country returned to democratic rule, till 2023, when the last general elections were held will be presented. These statistics were pooled from the Inter Parliamentary Union's (IPU) website which indicates past and current statistics of women in national parliaments for each year. IPU's ranking of women's representation in national parliaments are obtained from the details of the percentage of women in the lower or single House as presented by each country (IPU, 2018; 2023).

TABLE 1- WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT IN NIGERIA (1999-2023)

	LOWER OR SINGLE HOUSE				UPPER HOUSE OF SENATE				
YEAR	RANK	ELECTIONS	SEATS	WOMEN	%WOMEN	ELECTIONS	SEATS	WOMEN	% WOMEN
1999	-	02 1999	360			02 1999	109	3	2.8
2000	-	02 1999	351	12	3.4	02 1999	108	3	2.8
2001	-	02 1999	351	12	3.4	02 1999	108	3	2.8
2002	112 of 181	02 1999	351	12	3.4	02 1999	108	3	2.8
2003	107 of 181	04 2003	360	17	4.9	04 2003	107	3	2.8
2004	114 of 184	04 2003	360	17	4.7	04 2003	109	3	2.8
2005	119 of 187	04 2003	360	23	6.4	04 2003	109	4	3.7
2006	120 of 189	04 2003	360	22	6.1	04 2003	109	4	3.7
2007	117 of 188	04 2007	358	25	7.0	04 2007	109	9	8.3
2008	116 of 188	04 2007	358	25	7.0	04 2007	109	9	8.3
2009	122 of 187	04 2007	358	25	7.0	04 2007	109	9	8.3
2010	118 of 188	04 2007	358	25	7.0	04 2007	109	9	8.3
2011	125 of 189	04 2011	352	24	6.8	04 2011	109	7	6.4
2012	125 of 190	04 2011	360	24	6.7	04 2011	109	7	6.4

2013	125 of 188	04 2011	360	24	6.7	04 2011	109	7	6.4
2014	133 of 189	04 2011	360	24	6.7	04 2011	109	7	6.4
2015	134 of 190	03 2015	360	20	5.6	03 2015	108	7	6.5
2016	178 of 193	03 2015	360	20	5.6	03 2015	108	7	6.5
2017	180 of 193	03 2015	360	20	5.6	03 2015	108	7	6.5
2018	181 of 193	03 2015	360	20	5.6	03 2015	108	7	6.5
2019	182 of 186	02 2019	360	13	3.6	02 2019	109	8	7.3
2023	181 of 185	02 2023	360	14	3.9	02 2023	109	3	2.8

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, (2018; 2023)

A close examination of Table 1 above shows that since Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, the highest representation that women ever got in parliament till date was at the 2007 elections. As of 1st December 2023, going by statistics of the February 2023 elections, Nigeria was ranked as the 181st out of 186 countries, in terms of women representation in national parliaments globally (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). No doubt, the figures of women in parliament in Nigeria are poor, but this is not unconnected to the number of female candidates that ran for political office in the last elections.

TABLE 2-WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN POLITICAL OFFICES IN NIGERIA (1999 – 2023)

YEAR	**PRESIDENCY**		**VICE PRESIDENCY**		**GOVERNORS**		**DEPUTY GOVERNORS**		**SENATE**		**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**	
	Available Seats	**No. of Women**	**Available Seats**	**No. of Women**	**Available Seats**	**No. of Women**	**Available Seats**	**No. of Women**	**Available Seats**	**No. of Women**	**Available Seats**	**No. of Women**
1999	1	0	1	0	36	0	36	1	109	3	360	12
2003	1	0	1	0	36	0	36	2	109	4	360	21
2007	1	0	1	0	36	0	36	6	109	9	360	23
2011	1	0	1	0	36	0	36	3	109	7	360	26

2015	1	0	1	0	36	0	36	4	109	7	360	19
2019	1	0	1	0	29	0	29	4	109	8	360	13
2023	1	0	1	0	31	0	31	8	109	3	360	14

Source: Adapted from Independent National Electoral Commission 1999, 2003, 2007, 2022, 2015 & 2019 results; IPU, 2022; Kareem, 2021; Ugwu & Okoye, 2022; The Periscope Global, 2023.

Table 2 above shows that from the 1999 till the 2023 elections, only a handful of women were elected into political leadership positions in Nigeria. These figures of women representation are alarmingly low and one of the lowest across the globe. Several factors including discriminatory gender norms and practices, patriarchal values, fear of violence and intimidation associated with electoral activities, social, economic and cultural reasons have been identified in the literature as responsible for the low representation of women in political offices in Nigeria (Idike, Okeke, Okorie, Ogba & Ugodulunwa, 2020; Okoosi-Simbine & Obi, 2021). In the next section of this paper, attention will be on the statistics of female candidates for the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

Female Candidates for Political Offices in the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria

The Independent National Electoral Commission's website reveals that for the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, 18 political parties nominated candidates for political offices. These political offices contested for included one presidential constituency, one vice presidential office, 109 senatorial districts and 360 federal constituencies. In the table below, a breakdown of the figures of male and female candidates for the various political offices is presented.

TABLE 3- CANDIDATES FOR POLITICAL OFFICES IN THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

Office	No. of Seats	No. of Candidates	No. of Males	No. of Females
President	1	18	17	1
Vice President	1	18	18	0
Senate	109	1101	1009	92
House of Representatives	360	3122	2832	288

Source: INEC, 2022

There was only one female candidate out of the 18 that contested for the presidential seat; the same applied for the vice presidency. A close look at Table 3 above clearly shows that the figures of female candidates for the Senate and House of Representatives is very little when placed side by side with those of male candidates. In the March 2023 gubernatorial race, election took place in 28 out of 36 states in Nigeria. Later in November 2023, off-season governorship elections were held in Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi states. An examination of the number of female candidates that contested for political offices show that they were very few in comparison with the figures of male candidates. Despite the declaration by INEC that 44.4 million out of 93.5 million voters in the 2023 elections are women, only 10.1 percent of candidates fielded by political parties were females (Thomas-Odia, 2023).

A lot of things determine the meagre number of female candidates that political parties in Nigeria field for various positions; there are party politics, the existence of restrictive gender norms, unfavorable party structures, highly competitive party primaries and nomination processes and a host of other factors. Often times, only the "smaller" and not so-popular parties field more women and have their entry requirements easier for them. For the major political parties, it's easier for men to sail through party politics to get selected as candidates for parties' primaries than it is for women. All these factors in one way or the other limit the chances of women's selection as party candidates in the overall pool. A careful examination of the list of candidates for the 2023 elections in Nigeria show that women were only a handful, and this is a growing concern. Hence, the next section of the paper assesses the structures and mechanisms put in place by three major political parties in Nigeria to increase the engagement of women in political leadership positions.

Party Structures and Female Political Candidacy in Nigeria

In this section of the paper, we will examine the structures put in place by the three major political parties in Nigeria during the 2023 elections, to enhance the political candidacy of women. These political parties include the All Progressives Congress (APC) which is the ruling party, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which is the leading opposition party and the Labour Party (LP), which became popular towards the 2023 elections. Gleaning through the constitutions of the three parties, an examination of their processes and structures, particularly as regards offices assigned to women revealed that women do not occupy strategic offices.

In the APC constitution, in the National Executive, National Working, Zonal Executive, State Executive, State Working, Senatorial District, Local Government Area Executive, Ward Executive and Polling Unit Committees, as well as Local Government Area/Area Council and State Caucuses, offices assigned to women were just as women leaders (APC, 2014). The office assigned to women in PDP is not significantly different from those of APC. The women leader office is for women at the Ward Executive, Local Government Area Executive, Senatorial District Executive, State Working, State Executive, State Elders, Zonal Working Committees as well as the State Party Congress and National Executive Council (PDP, 2014).

An examination of the LP (nd) constitution, as displayed on the INEC website shows that just like APC and PDP, it created the woman leader position in the National Executive Council, National Working, State Executive, State Working and Local Government Area Working Committees. The distinguishing factor between LP and the two other parties is that, asides the Woman Leader position, its constitution also stipulates the creation of offices for six deputy national women leaders representing each of the geo-political zones in Nigeria in the National Executive Council and National Working Committee. It also provides for offices of three deputy state women leaders in the State Executive and State Working Committees. In addition, out of the four positions for a vice chairman in the Local Government Area Executive Council and its Working Committee, one must be a female. At the Ward Executive Council, of the two vice chairmen, one is expected to be a female. Irrespective of the offices created for women by the three political parties, their hierarchies and major positions are dominated by men.

At the ward, local government, state or national level, the "woman leader" position is not strategic as this does not significantly increase the engagement of women as leaders in political decision-making positions in Nigeria. Typically, women leaders mobilize and co-ordinate women, implement programmes that will make Nigerian women to embrace their parties and perform other functions assigned by the National Executive and National Working Committees of their political parties. During the campaign rallies for the 2023 elections, to show solidarity, women dressed in matching outfits referred to as "*aso ebi"* and mobilized by women leaders mostly sang and danced. Beyond these, most women leaders were invisible and sidelined from speaking at these rallies. Though they are active supporters of political party mobilization, the exclusion of the voices of women leaders at campaign rallies is being challenged. For instance, the National Women Leader of PDP, Stella Effah-Attoe decried efforts to subvert her office and prevent her from addressing party faithful at the flag off ceremony of the party, in Uyo (Ailemen, 2022).

An important factor that aids women's leadership is gender inclusion in the internal organization and procedures of political parties. For PDP, there are sections of the constitution that affirm quotas for women. Article 32 (1) states that:

> *There shall be Board of Trustees of the party which consists of – (a) all past and serving Presidents and Vice Presidents of the Federal Republic of Nigeria……(e) two women selected from each of the six geo-political zones; (f) three members, at least one of whom shall be a woman, from each of the geo-political zones.*

No doubt, these quotas are well-intended to promote gender inclusion and allow for more women in the top echelons of decision-making for the party. Nonetheless, majority of the positions have been continually occupied by men over the years with few or no women involved.

For LP (2022a), there is a Women's Policy on the party's website which states that:

> *A critical mass of women politicians must be reached through affirmative action policies/quotas. A 30 percent minimum quota in all appointive and elective positions shall be considered, and mechanisms for demanding and monitoring the implementation of such quotas should be developed. An Equal Opportunities Commission could be a viable organ to support this process…..The party shall strive to seek to engender fundamental alternations in power relations between the sexes, in the distribution of social resources and in cultural mores. It shall seek to empower women in order to enhance their status. Transform the economic, social, psychological political and legal circumstances of women through a comprehensive review of existing laws in the country to update them and remove discrimination against our women folk, especially in the area of empowerment, marriage, credit, home-ownership, inheritance and widowhood……..Sensitize women on their role as advocates for changes in the society, the Party shall take active, practical and concrete steps to empower and raise the consciousness of Nigerian women and shall facilitates access by them to the various organs of the Party, and to the agencies of government…... Especially, the Party shall ensure that the women are encouraged to contest elective party and public/political offices/posts at all levels of the Party organization and at all levels of government.*

The Women's Policy, no doubt if implemented, would have availed women of leadership positions as more women would have contested for political posts at all levels of government, but this is not the situation. The LP did not field any female candidate for the presidency or vice presidency, only one woman is contesting on the platform of the party for the senatorial seat in Abuja, one woman for the gubernatorial seat in Rivers state, one woman for the deputy governor position in Cross River state. The growing recognition of the need for internal reforms for the promotion of gender equality between men and women within the party structure of APC necessitated amendments to the party's constitution. The amended constitution recommended a women's wing, the inclusion of a deputy national woman leader in its National Working Committee and a gender and affirmative action clause (APC, 2022). The Women's Wing would function autonomously within the party structure but will be subject to the party supervision and discipline. Article 13, sections 1 and 2 of the APC amended constitution states that:

> *In demonstration of the Party's commitment to ensuring greater participation of women in its affairs and government at all levels, the Party shall work towards the progressive realization of gender equality. The National Working Committee shall design the mechanism for achieving the objective, subject to the approval of the National Executive Committee.*

Despite the identified need to allow for greater representation of women and their political candidacy, only two women are members of the National Working Committee for APC and LP, while for PDP, only the women leader is a member (Akpan, 2022; Banjo, 2022; LP, 2022b). These are clear pointers that these parties still have a long way to go in ensuring gender parity as offices assigned to women are mere tokenism. Asides the issue of allocating quotas for women in party constitutions, another important factor for women's political engagement is availability of financial resources. Scholars have asserted that being a woman and not having access to adequate financial resources jeopardizes women's chances of political recruitment (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020).

TABLE 4 – COST OF NOMINATION FORMS BY MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

Name of Political Party	Presidential Aspirants	Governorship Aspirants	Senatorial Aspirants	House of Representatives Aspirants	State House of Assembly Aspirants
APC	N100 million	N50 million	N20 million	N10 million	N2 million
PDP	N40 million	N21 million	N3.5 million	N2.5 million	N600,00
LP	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Source: Compiled from Bakare, 2022; Ufuoma, 2022

Table 4 above shows the cost of nomination forms for various political offices. Although the cost of the forms was on the high side, female aspirants on the platform of APC were exempted from payment while those that contested on the platform of PDP got 50 percent reduction in cost (Itodo, 2022; Iwok, 2022). This exemption did not transcend into any meaningful increase in the number of female contestants as Iwok added that APC had 103 female candidates while PDP had 72 female candidates. The low statistics of women political contestants is not unconnected to the high cost of running for political office. Beyond the procurement of nomination forms, there are other expenditures that come with competing in elections, which many women cannot afford.

Breaking Patterns of Gender Exclusion: Insights from Political Parties in Africa

There is likelihood for greater participation and increased engagement of women when there is a larger pool of eligible female political candidates. To break patterns of gender exclusion, special mechanisms have been put in place by political parties in different African countries to equip women and increase their representation in political spaces. One of such mechanisms is the adoption of voluntary quotas by parties to increase women's political representation. It's known that Rwanda has the highest representation of women in parliament globally. To achieve this, major political parties including the Rwandan Patriotic Front and the Centrist Democratic Party adopted voluntary party quotas, which assigned 30 percent of decision making seats to women (Africa Barometer, 2021).

Evidence has also shown that women occupy some of the topmost decision making positions and that their representation in parliament is high in countries including Namibia, South Africa, Mozambique and Cameroon, because the ruling political parties adopted the use of voluntary quotas to enhance the political representation of females (Ramtohul 2021, Africa Barometer, 2021). In Namibia, women occupy 44 percent of seats in parliament, 46 percent in South Africa, 43 percent in Mozambique and 33 percent in Cameroon. For voluntary party quotas to work however, it is important that parties are committed and also have internal structures to enforce compliance.

Another strategy that political parties have adopted to break patterns of gender exclusion is the introduction of the Zebra principle. A major advantage of this principle is that irrespective of the system adopted, it allows men and women to have the equal opportunity for equal representation. M'Cormack-Hale (2018) reported that the adoption of a 50 percent gender quota by the African National Congress in South Africa and the South West African People's Organisation in Namibia through a 'zebra' principle made room for more women in political leadership positions. The zebra principle in Namibia alternated positions between men and women in a way that every second candidate was a woman. In essence, its rotational nature gave both men and women equal chances of representation.

In Senegal, the gender parity law that was introduced in 2010 mandates political parties to ensure that 50 percent of candidates fielded for local and national elections are women. Without 50 percent of the candidates on party lists being women, they were declared void (Lim, 2020). This accounts for the increase in the political representation of women in the country and is also a major reason why women in Senegal occupy 46 percent of the seats in parliament (IPU, 2023). In the case of Ethiopia, women's representation increased because gender quotas were adopted by the country's largest party;

Prosperity Party. Muhammed and Abebe (2023) observed that women's representation in Ethiopian parliament grew from 7 percent in 2000 to 38 percent in 2015, after the general election. Apart from this, reports have shown that parties that present female candidates for elections in Ethiopia get extra financial allocation (Luchsinger & Meena, 2008). This is as a result of the Ethiopian Electoral and Political Parties Proclamation which makes provision for funding opportunities for political parties using criteria including the number of nominated female candidates, number of female members of the party and number of female leadership positions, among others.

To address gendered financial inequalities and increase women's political recruitment, political parties in Ghana reduced the filing fees for women contestants and expanded the number of party delegates at the primaries, so as to downplay the role of money in elections (Wang, Muriaas & Bauer, 2023). This meant that asides the concession given to women on the filing fees, the expansion of the party delegates made the process to be more democratic and inclusive, allowing for more women to emerge from the primaries as political candidates. Going by the low representation of women in the Ghanaian parliament, at the 2012 and 2016 party primaries, two main political parties in the country gave discounts to women on filing fees to recruit more female candidates (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020.). Although this didn't bring about the desired results for the emergence of women candidates in Ghana due to other limiting factors, it was an act of commitment by party leaders to recruit more women to run for offices.

Conclusion

The mechanisms and structures of political parties can either disempower the political candidacy of women or strengthen it. It is therefore very important for parties as gateways to the political space to ensure gender inclusivity in party hierarchies and in mechanisms for enhancing the representation of women. Not only should gender inclusivity be a priority, internal party mechanisms for effective implementation must be put in place. It's therefore imperative in a bid to ensure better representation for women for political parties in Nigeria to adopt any, or a combination of voluntary quotas, the Zebra principle, gender parity legislations and reduction of filing fees. Beyond these, the commitment to seeing to the implementation of these measures is most important.

The major political parties examined in this paper have women's wings; it's essential that women leaders across all levels be strengthened beyond just mobilizing women and garnering their support for these parties. Women leaders should be empowered to incorporate issues related to women's concerns in party manifestoes, in addition to identifying, encouraging and recommending potential candidates from the ward to national levels to the party leadership for recruitment and fielding for political offices. The identified women should also be allowed to take up significant positions and wield real power within the party hierarchies. Informal norms of political violence against women such as verbal abuse, physical attacks, sexual harassment and intimidation should also be discouraged. When women feel safe, they will be willing to take engage more in political activities. Lastly, adequate information and mentoring opportunities on political processes and candidacy should be made available to women by political parties in Nigeria, so as to equip and build their confidence as political aspirants.

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