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Women, Conflict and Politics: Assessing Margaret Ekpo's Approach to Political Emancipation and Liberation in Nigeria

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Abstract: For generations, the potential of Nigerian women to contribute effectively to national development seems to be suppressed by many factors which cut across religious, environmental and cultural constraints. Consequently, women have strongly resolved to renegotiate their relevance through the adoption and utilization of various initiatives. At the forefront, one of these initiatives early in time was Margaret Ekpo (1914-2006), a Nigerian female political activist who unilaterally began radical movements in parts of Nigeria to transform the political consciousness of the Nigerian women, and to reverse gender-related inequalities in the country. This paper sets out to evaluate her approaches to what could be described as political re-engineering. It develops a framework drawing from theories of conflict resolution and the principles of liberalism and feminism. Findings show that despite of the limited formal education and political ideologies to which she was exposed to, she was able to rise above the prevailing challenges of her time to build a firm pedestal upon which many women politicians in Nigeria have stood to launch themselves to political limelight. The study concludes that the principles of liberalism and a desire to foster the political development of Nigeria account for Margaret Ekpo's venture into the political field.

Keywords: Margaret Ekpo, women, conflict, politics, emancipation

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The ability of women to efficiently function in various capacities to foster human growth and development in global societal development cannot be over-emphasized. This is evident when the various contributions that women make within the micro- and macro-levels of world regions are assessed. Beginning from the primary task of child-bearing and home-keeping, women have contributed no small measure to the sustenance and maintenance of the global population. Women virtually dominate the various aspects of any economy ranging from subsistence to secondary and tertiary production in private and public settings. In addition to this, women have played various roles of coordination as community, national, corporate and international managers, directors, administrators and agents of changes within cultural, social and political environments to boost the societal development of countries of the world. However, for many years, the roles and responsibilities of women as vehicles for development remained sidelined

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or marginalized in many respects. The factors accounting for the low appreciation of women's role in development then included the lack of access to land ownership and the consideration of women as "weaker or inferior sexes" and therefore second-class citizens were better suited for the primary role of procreation, child-care and home-keeping. The factors that have impeded and shielded women's social and economic contributions have also suppressed the attainment of political initiatives, subsequently freezing opportunities for advancement and transformation in the various spheres of human endeavour (Etta 2007; Brekk et al. 1985). The prevailing traditional and parochial belief systems relegated women to backgrounds thereby instituting the phenomena of inequality, exclusion and the generic use of the term "gender marginalization or discrimination", which related to the social process of women being made marginal of discrimination against on the basis of their sex.

Despite of the fact that many women have made determined efforts to break the bounds of marginalization against all odds, few studies strive to capture the guiding principles that were employed to foster the successful attainment to heights and even the sphere of influence by these women. This paper highlighted how the persistence and strong resolve of one woman, Margaret Ekpo, against the prevailing difficult cultural and political situations, propelled a change in women's political participation and activism within Nigeria. This is as exemplified in the principles of feminism, emancipation and liberation, which seek to bring about recognition of women without any form of bias or marginalization.

GENDER EQUITY: A PROLIFIC PRE-REQUISTE IN AN EGALITARIAN SOCIETY

In recent times, there has been a global awareness and consciousness of the significant impacts made by women and the need to involve and empower them in national development. The sudden realization has attracted the attention of world leaders and non-governmental organizations to the consequences of excluding women from national development and its attendant effects which are best described as putting a clog in the wheel of national development, because women numerically constitute approximately 50% of the contributors to the national capital package of any country. The growing consciousness is extended to ensure that the development of women is geared toward addressing the prevention of any act or form of historically and culturally inflicted injuries and usurpations that attempt to destroy a woman's confidence in her own powers, which gradually culminates in destroying her worth and self-esteem and ultimately makes her lead a dependent-bound abject life (Gelles and Levine 1999).

The new awareness and awakening to gender equity are centered on the need to develop women through promoting the subject of equality and equity between male and female. Emphasis is presently directed toward highlighting the roles that women have played in enhancing the socio-economic development of various countries over time. The movement for gender equality in contemporary times dated back to the 1700s when the colonial American women were deprived of the rights to vote and own properties. In 1945, the UN Charter on the Fundamental Human Rights was endorsed. In 1947, the UN Commission on the Status of Women was established which created a conducive platform for promoting the rights of women. The 1960s ushered in renewed emphasis and protests for the civil rights of all human beings irrespective of creed, race, sex and nationality. The consequence of the protests was the promulgation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which further gave credence to the struggle for human liberation and emancipation from all forms of marginalization or oppression.

There are various theories that provide explanations for the gender differentiation and stratification of men and women. While some critics stress the sexual basis of stratification, others like [254]

the Marxists and socialists prefer to relate to societal class stratification. One theoretical index that captures the concern for the gender equality and equity movement lies within the discourse of the subject matter of liberal feminism. Liberal feminism highlights the societal indicators that deter women's development within regions based on cultural, social and economic attributes and the held perspectives that women are lesser beings both intellectually and physically, thereby creating avenues for the oppression, suppression and marginalization of women.

As a school of thought, feminism is a post-modern and intellectual movement that simply seeks to "examine women's contributions to social life and highlight the nature of the structures and processes that maintain gender inequality" (Huges et al. 1999: 17). Feminism as an academic thought process has undergone various stages of debates, evolutions, conflicts and changes in a bid to synthesize and structure the roles of women over time. In order to portray women's contribution to the growth and development of the world, there is a need to properly account for and document the local and global contributions of women in governance and leadership positions. To this effect, the 21st century has witnessed a remarkable turning point in the acknowledgement and consciousness of the significant contributions of women in various fields of human endeavor.

This is as enhanced by effective women's organizations and movements such as 1975 International Women's Year (IWY) by the United Nations; the First Intergovernmental Conference on Women in 1975; the 1980 Second World Conference on Women in Copenhagen; the Third World Women's Conference in Nairobi, Kenya; the global 1995 Conference on Women in Beijing, China; and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which earmarks targets for women's development and empowerment. The central objectives of these conventions involved deliberations and the proffering of strategies to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women while also emphasizing critical women and conflict concerns such as violence, human rights, the girl-child and other issues that have the potential to presently or subsequently affect women (Charles 2010). It is worthy of note that, despite of the extraneous and frequently outlandish environments within which many women operate, remarkable milestones have been recorded which have fostered the growth and development of many countries within many developing regions of the world.

TRENDS IN AFRICA: PROMULGATING THE ABILITY OF WOMEN TO EXCEL WITHIN POLITICAL REALMS

Despite of the various mythological considerations of African women as lesser, inferior, domestic and economic parasites (Blumberg 2000), African women have proven their ability to promote and sustain the growth and development of nations over time in more ways than one. Historical recounts of the leadership attainments of figures such as Queen Candace of Ethiopia and Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt constitute a fraction of the contributions that women have made toward political development. In recent times, Wininie Mandela of South Africa, Flora Nnamdi Azikiwe, Hajiya Gambo Sawaba, Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margaret Ekpo, etc., have made striking efforts to contribute to women development, though the proportion still leaves much to be desired. Many factors account for this such as the low levels of literacy among African women compared to western counterparts; the relegation of women to limited opportunities and the societal acceptance of the roles of women as being largely for domestic and reproductive purposes. Attempts have been intensified over time to ensure a viable degree of equity for women development through various policies such as the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) adopted in 1981 and its Women's Rights Protocol of 2003; the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Democracy and the Good Governance (2001); the [255]

New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) of July, 2001, in addition to other international agreements (National Gender Policy 2006). It can be surmised that the attempts aimed at enabling women overcome all forms of inequality are gradually gaining momentum within Africa. Yet, it is important to continually put measures in place that can act to safeguard the rights of the African women.

WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA OVER TIME

In every society, the direction of leadership is either installed by the people or forced upon the people. In the same manner, the duty of the leadership is to sustain the welfare of the people who have the right to voice out concerns that may be of advantage or vice versa (Ibezute 1999). To this effect, people have always indicated in one way or the other when the leaders in authority fail to satisfy the needs of the people. This logically implies that leaders must be accountable to the people they serve. Accountability within this context is devoid of the sexes of male or female.

However, the concern for stewardship monitoring and accountability has for too long been the exclusive preserve of the men-folk in Nigeria. This is evident when the historical and socio-political involvement of women in development periods are critically analyzed. The obvious trend has been the intentional exclusion or marginalization of women in political discusses. The exclusion of Nigerian women from political processes in Nigeria can be categorized into two periods, namely, the pre-colonial and the colonial periods, during which time, women made significant attempts at fostering the development of Nigeria. Recounts can be traced to pre-colonial and colonial personalities such as Queen Bakwa Tukuru, Moremi of Ife, Queen Idia of Benin, Emotan of Benin, Queen Amina of Zaria, Omu Okwei of Ossamari, Queen Jaja of Opobo, Queen Kambasa of Ijawland, Fumilayo Ransome Kuti, Margaret Ekpo, etc. These women in numerous ways proved that womanhood was not a barrier to promote laudable leadership and excellence within one's sphere of influence. Paradoxically however, these heights of achievements were wrought at a time when the general role of the Nigerian women was basically relegated to domestic responsibilities that largely entailed maintenance of the family in addition to agricultural and small scale production of goods and services such as pottery, birth attendant services, fish-drying, agriculture and so on (Ettah-Attoe 2000). In addition, women were constrained by cultural, religious and constitutional forces, not to exercise many of their political rights. The spates of conflicting situations that resulted culminated in the emergence of women's movements which demanded greater political participation in Nigeria as exemplified by the struggle of Margaret Ekpo. This struggle for a free and fair involvement of women in politics continues in Nigeria even to present times.

The assertion by Mandela finds support when the historical evaluations of the contribution of women are analyzed. Women in Nigeria constitute more than two thirds of the country's 70% adult non-literate population while they hold less than 5% of the decision-making positions. The indicators clearly point out the fact that despite of the dominance of women, constituting well over two thirds of the nation's 70% non-literate population, Nigerian women have made efforts that have not only cut across the micro-spheres of domestic achievements, but also extended to macro-developmental scales thereby propelling rapid political developments. However, worthy [256]
of mention, is the contribution of Margaret Ekpo, who protests the prevailing odd situations resolved to propel a political wind of change which to this day remains indelible in the political time-scale of Nigeria. To this effect, this paper sets out to critically analyze the attempt made by Margaret Ekpo, to encourage the involvement of women as political stakeholders in the colonial eastern region of Nigeria. A feat to this day remains acknowledged in Nigeria.

MARGARET EKPO'S CONFLICTUAL CATALYST TO THE POLITICAL LIBERATION OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA

Margaret Ekpo was born on July 27, 1914 in Adiabo Okurikang Creek Town, in Odukpani Local Government Area of Cross River State. As the 5th child in a family of nine children, she attained the standard six level of education in 1934. However, the death of her father in 1934 culminated in the discontinuation of her educational pursuits and the goals of further education. She commenced work as a schoolteacher and taught in various primary schools, namely Creek Town Primary School, Calabar and St George's Primary School, Aba (1936). In line with the socio-cultural traditions that prevailed in the typical African setting, early marriages for the girl-child within the colonial dispensation were encouraged. Margaret was married off to a medical doctor named John Udo Ekpo, in 1938. Owing to marital demands, Margaret and her husband relocated to Aba, a commercial hub nub in the South Eastern axis of Nigeria. Subsequently, Margaret Ekpo further obtained a diploma in Domestic Economics awarded by the Kathrines' School of Domestic Economics, Dublin in 1946. Margaret Ekpo's foray into the field of political activism was traced back to 1945 and the peculiarity of this was that she ventured into the realm of politics at a period when the Nigerian women were forbidden from participating in any form of political activity and constitutional development. The trigger to her involvement emanated from her husband's indignation and frustration with the existing discriminatory colonial managerial policies, approach and treatment meted out to indigenous Nigerian doctors. The characteristic features that propelled the dissatisfaction included slow promotion of indigenous doctors who were required to travel abroad before promotion, denial of incentives to the local resident doctors which could be best described as discrimination and the absence of a platform for government officials to express any form of dissatisfaction in the work place. Suffice it to mention that a top-down approach which excluded a medium for stakeholder interactive forum constituted a conducive ground for conflicts and disagreements. The only available medium through which the doctor could possibly have aired his grievance was the listening and attentive ears of his wife.

Margaret, although dissatisfied with the circumstances and highly conscious of the existing top-down decision model which provided little or no opportunities for public office holders to voice out their dissatisfaction, her natural recourse, and the only option was the public sphere where she continuously decried and highlighted the need for rectification of the managerial ills that prevailed thereby creating opportunities for conflict situations (Ekpo 2003). Conscious of the need to address the injustice, the determined and strong-willed Margaret Ekpo set out to address the problems confronting the indigenous doctors in a consensual system where the decision-making process excluded the opinions of women who were considered to be erroneously represented by the opinions of husbands and fathers. The presentation of women's ideals by men then was borne out of ethnic ignorance and the consequence of this, to the detriment of women development, was the alienation of women from effective active participation in decision-making situations of the family and society at large. Embedded in the determination to propel a change in the course of events is the polarization of society along ethnic formations and thereby creating [257] avenues for the development of conflicts and struggles between the varied constituents such as resources allocation. With reference to politics and resource distribution, it is seen that the terms "gender" and "ethnicity" frequently highlight negative connotations owing to the fact that both may be considered as sources of power within a polity or the sphere of conflictive power played and struggled by groups (Goubadi 2007). Such power struggles have been known to catapult negative effects, but at the same time, case studies have shown that conflict situations can become complex for inducing positive winds of change that have spanned generations.

The political rally championed by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and supported by the likers of political stakeholders such as Herbert Maculey and Mbonu Ojike, in 1945 provided a breeding ground for the birth of politicking to the young Margaret. This was largely because the political leaders emphasized the need for liberation, emancipation and independence from colonial leadership. For Margaret Ekpo, attendance of such organized meetings initiated a zeal for actively participating in politics to address social issues. Given the societal norm, value system and traditional beliefs which prohibited the involvement of women in such public settings, Margaret, with the cooperation and support of her husband, was able to avidly against all odds, and constantly attended the meetings as the only female. Despite of the series of marginalization she encountered at the various meetings she attended, she remained resolute, undeterred and continued attending the meetings until she was gradually accepted and integrated as a stakeholder. One understanding Margaret Ekpo had was that, despite of being a woman, she could benefit in multiple ways thereby resulting in her persistence to attend the meetings. The consequence of her attendance of the political rallies enhanced her understanding and knowledge of the need for liberation, particularly as emphasis was placed on the need for all, irrespective of sex to join forces and fight for the independence of Nigeria.

In addition to gaining her liberation from the "political seclusion" that existed then, Margaret Ekpo proceeded to enable other women in Eastern Nigeria to achieve liberation and emancipation through the organization of a Market Women Association in Aba (1945) to unionize market women to be aware of their rights within the city. Despite of the challenges she faced in getting the support of women at a time when it was culturally declared a taboo for women to be involved in politics, she was able to overcome the challenge of women participation through the sales of table salt, a rare resource at the point in time. The peculiarity of her approach involved the adoption of a "compulsion strategy" which involved the ingenious method of purchasing the available bags of salt from the market and subsequently monopolizing the sales of the salt only to women who were registered with the Association. This became a bait to attract women into the union for political liberation particularly as husbands who had no access to salt eventually succumbed and allowed their wives become members of the Association (Ekpo 2003). The Aba Market Women Association translated into a pressure group that addressed issues that related to the welfare of women using threats, demonstrations and coordinated deliberations. The force of operation of the Aba Market Women Association is traceable to the Iva Valley Massacres of 1949 in Enugu, when colonial troops in obedience to a British officer, killed 20 striking miners agitating for a pay rise. In response to the fight for justice, the Aba Market Women Association coordinated by Margaret Ekpo, mobilized other women across the country to protest the killings and subsequently ensured that justice prevailed. Indeed, the severity of her approach to the political success was often, though erroneously, attributed to the 1929 Aba Women Riot, which protested the non-inclusion and recognition of women in taxation concerns. Margaret Ekpo's delve into the realm of politics in Nigeria continued and in 1954, she was specially nominated on the platform of National Council of Nigeria Citizenry to the Regional House of Chiefs to represent the interest of women. Though the nomination stirred up a debate as to the appropriateness of her appointment, she excelled against all odds to occur her position in the House of Chiefs from 1954 to 1958. [258]

Her political sojourn intensified and she ensured that the position of women in the political development of Nigeria was not forgotten through constantly staging political rallies that centered on women's liberation, sensitization and education. The landmark of this appointment was the opportunity that presented subsequently for other women in Nigeria to be appointed chiefs

as well. Margaret Ekpo collaborated with other women notably Mrs Flora Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Mrs Fumilayo Ransome Kuti to initiate attempts for women empowerment in the eastern and southern regions of Nigeria through the promotion of rights particularly, rights of women, economic protections and expansionary political rights of women.

By 1960, Margaret Ekpo headed the presidential position of the women's wing, National Council of Nigerian Citizenry (NCNC). Never one to be unsurpassed, she, despite of being a non-indigene contested and won election in Aba North Constituency into the Eastern Regional House of Assembly, Enugu in 1962. This position empowered her to fight for issues on the progress of women in economic and political matters nationally and internationally, especially in the areas of transportation around major roads leading to markets and rural transportation in general. Margaret Ekpo also represented women's interest in the Nigerian Constitutional Conference in Lancaster House of London which culminated in the Independence of Nigeria in 1960.

It was important to consider the principles that prompted Margaret Ekpo toward inducing a new wave of political change in her environment. A distinguishing feature exhibited by Margaret Ekpo was the fact that in addition to the limited education she had received, she was conscious of global trends that the drive for women recognition was gaining greater momentum. In addition to this, the consciousness of her rights and also that she could offer some intellectual contributions within her sphere of influence, irrespective of any form of support from other women at the time and as such were not to be inhibited in any way.

The actions of Margaret Ekpo were well rooted in the discourse of liberal feminism where, owing to gender inequalities within the social and cultural milieu, she attempted to restructure the existing system for the institution of a gradual change. Liberal feminism adopts a neutralist approach in analyzing the gender divide as it emphasizes the need for women to adapt to the structured configurations of male-dominated societies. Margaret Ekpo in effect, adjusted her intents with the structure of the political profile in place then, while at the same time forged for a possible change that could be of significance to her personal and family development. While some studies have argued that the direction of thought undertaken by the liberal feminists could be likened to the "killing of a fly with a sledge hammer", based on its exacerbated emphasis on equality, it was imperative to understand that women given the same conditions as the men-folk were well able to function within any environment.

While it remains debatable to assume the possibility of what indices will need to be put in place to enable a complete liberation from radical feminists, chauvinistic manipulations and sexists' oppressions of women within patriarchic systems, it is important to note that the complementary roles performed by both men and women for equity in all spheres of life can hardly be overlooked. This is because within the African environment, both sexes perform defined roles that are complementary in nature to create a level of balance and stability for growth and development. Liberal African feminism has also been described as "womanism" and it connotes the realization of what tradition or custom represents for the African women and how to work to reorder such tradition and custom to the complete liberation and empowerment of women [259] (Charles 2005; Kemp 1994). Margaret Ekpo certainly utilized the principle of liberal African feminism to restructure an otherwise unbalanced cultural demand where women were merely to be seen and not heard or found in a position to contribute in decision-making processes. Margaret Ekpo was conscious of the need to break barriers by stepping forward to kick-start the sequence of events that earned her accolade in Nigeria.

CONCLUSIONS

Margaret Ekpo's contributions to foster women's involvement in politics are acknowledged and a number of international, national and local honours and awards have been dedicated to her such as the conferment of the officer of the Order of The Niger (OON) (1962); Award of First African Woman by the African Women International Club (1994); Life Patron, the National Council of Women's Societies (1989); Life Patron, Women in Nigeria (1989); Queen Amina Prize for Womanhood in the Category of Government and Politics by the Government of Nigeria (1992); Honorary Doctorate Degree of Letters (D. Litt) Honoris Causa by the University of Calabar (1995); Grand Patron, Cross River State Women in Politics (1997); Fellow, Institute of Governance and Social Research (FIGSR) (1998); Commander of the Federal Republic by the Federal Government (1999); Award of Excellence by the Nigeria Labour Congress (2000); Leadership Award by African Community Development Institute Inc. (ACODI), Washington D.C. (2000); and the First Female Elected Officer, Female Parliamentary Association of Nigeria (2006).

Landmark edifices and institutions have also been named after her such as the Margaret Ekpo International Airport (2001), Margaret Ekpo Women Education Centre, Calabar (1993) and the Margaret Ekpo Refectory Hall at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, amongst others. In a press chat granted few years before her death, she recounted thus:

> I'm in sympathy with female politicians today because the economic strangulation today has placed them at a disadvantage. My regret in life is that I sacrificed myself politically for this nation and then forgot myself. I left all my children, my husband, my job and plunged very deep into politics, but here I am today. Those whom we fought for, the Nigerians whom we fought for, the Nigerians we cared and care for, the Nigerians we tendered for, have all forgotten us. I hope Nigerians of this present generation will not forget those other women who are playing deep into politics.

In line with the principles of liberalism and feminism, Margaret Ekpo initiated a course of action that presently cannot be over-emphasized or forgotten in recounting the political development of Nigeria (Women in Nigeria 1996: 51-52).

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