

Yet Unanswered? The Youth and Gender Questions in a Decade of Democratic Governance in Nigeria*

Freedom C. Onuoha

Abstract

The attainment of a decade of uninterrupted democratic politics in Nigeria is quite unprecedented in the annals of the country's political history, and is worth celebrating. However, after about ten years of democratic rule, which has witnessed three civilian-to-civilian administrations, the challenges that confronted the country during the height of military rule are as worrisome as they were before the advent of democracy in 1999 as they are today. One of such engaging challenges is the issue of youth and gender questions in Nigeria. Adopting a political economy approach, the paper frames and interrogates the youth and gender questions in Nigeria from the perspective of the national question, arguing that the *questions* generically capture the contradiction between demographic strength, economic rewards and political representation, and how the ramifications of this contradiction impinges on the dynamics of sustainable democratic governance and development in Nigeria. It went further to argue that a review of the Nigerian landscape in the last few years reveals that a decade of democratic rule has not substantially expanded the space for women and youth to insert and assert themselves meaningfully in governance and development. The paper opines that the marginalization of women and youth in the processes of national development, especially in democratic governance is multidimensional and derives from the interplay of some political, economic, socio-cultural, and institutional factors. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations suggested by the analysis

Introduction

The end of the Cold War provided the much needed momentum for the third wave of democratization that swept across most countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the 1990s. The wave which surged across the African continent, caught-up with Nigeria on 29 May 1999, following the inauguration of the civilian administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo. The transition ended sixteen years of authoritarian rule under various

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military Heads of States that have variously organized “transition [to civilian rule] without end” (Diamond, *et al.* 1997). Nigeria’s return to democracy in 1999 rekindled new hopes and expectations among the populace about the possibility of the new political arrangement providing the institutional context for the resolution of many and varied challenges that have stunted the process of national development. Such challenges include, but are not limited to, endemic corruption, widespread incidences of violent crimes, the lingering crisis in the Niger Delta, high rate of poverty and unemployment, gender inequality, infrastructural decay, ethno-religious crisis, and the high prevalence of diseases such as Malaria and HIV/AIDS.

Without doubt, the attainment of a decade of uninterrupted democratic(?) politics in Nigeria is unprecedented in the annals of the country’s political history, and is worth celebrating. However, after about ten years of democratic rule, which has witnessed three civilian-to-civilian administrations, the challenges that confronted the country during the height of military rule are as worrisome as they were before the advent of democracy in 1999 as they are today. This has generated debates on whether Nigeria is truly practicing democracy or just a civilian rule. One of such engaging challenges is the issue of youth and gender *questions* in Nigeria. A concern many view as constituting one of the many paradoxes of democratic politics, not only in Nigeria but also in other countries of the world. This entails a situation where the demographic majority (youth and women) constitutes both the least represented politically and the worst marginalised socially, economically and materially. The marginalization of women and youth in politics and governance is not unique to Nigeria. However, it is widely believed that democracy, which is predicated on the principle of majority rule, offers a window of opportunity for

the marginalised groups to participate in shaping policies and decisions that affect their lives (Walby, 2008). Embedded in this understanding is the conviction that democratic governance should aim at providing equal opportunities and improving the socio-economic conditions of the people irrespective of ethnicity, religion, age or gender.

The subsisting argument is that there can be no democracy if women are not full political participants both in the process and institutions of governance (Azuike, 2005). Similarly, it is argued that youth participation and incorporation into decision-making processes is critical to building a sustainable democracy in Nigeria. The understanding therefore is that the issue of women and youth marginalization in institutions of political governance and decision-making structures of the state constitutes a critical challenge to democratic inclusiveness in Nigeria.

Therefore, a decade of democratic rule in Nigeria provides a background to, and the context for, assessing the extent to which the issue of youth and gender questions has been tackled in the last few years of civilian rule in Nigeria. It is in the light of the foregoing that this chapter addresses the following questions. How do we understand or frame the youth and gender questions in the context of Nigeria? Has the decade of democratic rule in Nigeria substantially expanded opportunities for youth and women to participate in governance and development in Nigeria? What factors could be advanced to explain the seeming disconnect between youth and women demographic strength and their marginal participation/representation in democratic governance in Nigeria? And what measures could be adopted to enhance youth and women participation in governance and development in Nigeria? These and other related questions are what this chapter seeks to address.

The rest of the chapter is organized under seven sections. First, the paper clarified the key concepts used in this discourse, and then proceeds to offer a treatment of the theoretical framework adopted in the study. The third section provides a brief overview of the situation of women and the youth in Nigeria. The next section dilates on the youth and gender questions within the context of a decade of democratic politics in Nigeria. The chapter highlighted the main factors responsible for the poor participation of women and youth in politics and governance in Nigeria in section five. Thereafter, it proffered some suggestion on how to enhance women and youth participation and representation in governance and development in Nigeria. The chapter ends with concluding reflections.

Conceptual Discourse

Given the tendency, especially in the field of social sciences, for concepts to elicit varying interpretations, matters of conceptual clarification are apposite not peripheral in a discourse like this. Accordingly, the concepts of ‘youth’ and ‘gender’ are central to this chapter and as such deserve a clarification of their meanings as used here.

Youth

The term ‘youth’ has been a subject of intense polemics in academic writing. At least four major definitional interpretations of the term are identifiable in extant literature, namely: youth as an age category; as transitional stage between childhood and adulthood; a social construct; and as a ‘social shifter’. Without prejudice to other definitions by member states, the United Nations defines ‘youth’ as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Social constructionists like Manni and Truzzi (1982) see youth as ‘mere social creation’, explaining that the way society organizes its labour, values and symbol

influences how the youth is defined (cited in Bomoi, 2007). For *transitionists*, youth refers to a period of life between childhood or adolescent and adulthood (see for instance Kenniston, 1972). Yet, others view the youth from the perspective of a social shifter – a relational term incorporating identity, time and space (Balle, 2007; Soares, 2000). However, scholars like Richter and Panday (2007:293) has questioned these classifications, insisting that “young people are not fixed category, neither historically, politically, culturally, socially and personally”.

Essentially for policy purposes, most African countries adopt the age-category definition. For instance, Kenya and Malawi define youth as 15-39 years of age; Sierra Leone, Ghana, Madagascar and Senegal as 15-35, and South Africa 14-35 years (Richter and Panday 2007:294). In Nigeria, the youth are defined as “all young persons of ages 18-35, who are citizen of the Federal Republic of Nigeria” (*National Youth Policy*, 2001:3).

Though varied in their interpretations, these definitions are useful in that they call for caution in dealing with youth matters and the necessity to put in place effective policy and programmes to mobilize, empower and channel the energies of youths to positive end in society (Bomoi, 2007). This is crucial given that the youth is the critical bridge that connects the incoming (younger) generation with the outgoing (older) generation in every society. Therefore, the way and manner the youth is treated in any society has grave consequences for the three generations: children, youth and elder. This underlies why most advanced countries implement policies and programmes consciously targeted at empowering and developing the youth. Given that our paper focuses on Nigeria, we shall

adopt the definition of youth as offered by the National Youth Policy (2001): that is Nigerians who are between the ages of 18 and 35 years.

Gender

Like the concept of youth, the term *gender* has been subjected to varying interpretations. In fact, there are as many definitions of gender as there are people, scholars, analysts and institutions grappling with the subject. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the term gender denotes:

The qualities associated with men and women that are socially and culturally, than biologically determined. Gender includes the way in which society differentiates appropriate behaviour and access to power for women and men. Although the details vary from society to society and change over time, gender relations tend to include a strong element of inequality between women and men and are strongly influenced by ideology (UNDP, 1986: 258).

Amali (2003:385) defines gender as socially constructed and culturally variable roles that men and women play in their homes. It is a structural relation of inequality between men and women, manifested in labour markets, in political structures as well as in the household. It is reinforced by customs, law and specific development policies. In other words, gender is a “social construct that establishes and differentiates statutes and roles between men and women particularly in the way they contribute to, participate in, and are rewarded by the economy and the prevailing social systems” (National Population Commission, 2001:3). Gender concerns involve women as well as men. Hence understanding gender means understanding opportunities, expectations, responsibilities and constraints as they affect both men and women in any given society.

More often, people confuse sex with gender. While sex differences are biologically determined, gender differences, which refer to ideals, rights, traits, and

expectations on the basis of masculinity and femininity, are socially and culturally constructed. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that although the two concepts (sex and gender) mean different things, an understanding of one enhances the comprehension of the other. Logically therefore, our understanding of the binary biological division of humans into male and female, as determined by their sex, is the irreducible minimum in understanding the social and cultural construction of roles in a society (defined in terms of gender) which derives essentially from the biological division of human beings.

Although it is important to make a distinction between *sex* and *gender*, it is equally important to understand that the former laid the foundation for the latter, *since it provides the main criterion for the assignment of roles in a society through role socialization*. Gender role socialization is instrumental in encouraging or discouraging males and females from undertaking certain activities or acquiring certain attributes or skills. Gender roles are therefore “prescribed expectations and obligations, responsibilities and behaviours, of the masculine and feminine genders” (Ezumah, 2003:82). Thus, in identifying gender, there are socio-economic attributions and roles, which characterize the status and life performance of women/girls as a distinct social category from men/boys. A unique feature of the gender system in any society is that it is characterised by inequality. This is usually expressed in terms of asymmetry in the access to societal resources, structures and values.

Interestingly, discourses on gender in Nigeria usually slide into an analysis of the disadvantaged position of Nigerian women as they struggle to realize their full potentials in the society. The reason for greater attention to focus on women, rather than men, is primarily because of the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society. By patriarchy, we

mean a “universal, trans-historical power system whereby men as a *sex-class* dominate women as a *sex class*” (Lawson and Heaton, 1999:195). It should not be surprising therefore that the gender question in this article would focus on the Nigerian women given that they are the marginalised gender.

Framework of Analysis

The argument of this paper is anchored on the Marxian political economy. The original theoretical formulation is traceable to the works of Karl Mark (see Stenning, 1926), however this paper adopted and adapted its simplified version by Ake (1981), which uses dialectical materialism as its methodological approach. Its fundamental theoretical postulation is that:

Once we understand what the material assets and constraints of a society are, how the society produces goods to meet its material needs, how the goods are distributed, and what types of social [including gender] relations arise from the organisation of production, we have come a long way to understanding the culture of that society, its laws, its religious system, its political system and even its modes of thought (Ake, 1981:1).

The theory of dialectical materialism is anchored on four methodological assumptions. First, is that it gives *primacy to material conditions*, particularly economic factors, in the explanation of social life. Hence it advocates for particular attention to be paid to the economic substructure of society, and indeed use it as the point of departure for studying other aspects of society. Second, it emphasizes the *dynamic character of reality*. This requires that the analyst views society as something which is full of movement and dynamism, being provided by the contradictions which pervade existence. Third, it focuses on the *relatedness of different elements of society*, especially economic structure, social structure, political structure, and the belief system. According to this theory, it is the economic factor which is the most decisive of all the elements of society

and which largely determine the character of the others. That is not to say that the economic structure is autonomous and strictly determines the others. All the social structures are interdependent and interact in complex ways. Each one of them affects the character of every other and is in turn affected by it. Fourth, it *treats problems concretely rather than abstractly*, by adopting a developmental perspective. By putting social phenomenon in the context of their development, this theory enables an analyst to understand not only how social phenomenon come to be what they are, but also to make reasonable conjecture as to what they might become (Ake, 1981:1-8).

In the context of the youth and gender questions in Nigeria, a proper understanding and application of this framework would lead the analyst to arrive at the following conclusions. First, those from the economically privileged groups (men) tend to be better educated, to have higher social status, and to be more 'successful' professionally and politically. This suggests that economic inequality tends to reproduce itself endlessly in a series of other inequalities evident in the society. Second, those who are economically privileged (men) tend to be interested in preserving the existing social order; and those who are disadvantaged (women and the youth) by the social order, particularly its distribution of wealth (including power and other valuable resources), have a strong interest in changing the social order. In this sense, the economic structure sets the general trend of political interests and political alignments. Third, in so far as there is wide economic inequality in a society, such society cannot have political democracy because political power will tend to polarise around economic power; further creating room for exclusion of certain groups (like women and youth). And finally, the

moral and societal values tend to support the preservation of the existing division of labour and the distribution of resources in that society.

From the foregoing, it is evident that this theory is analytically fecund to capture, if not explain, the complex contradictions that shape and define the youth and gender questions in Nigeria. Its fundamental assumption that a focus on the economic substructure is crucial for understanding other superstructures (politics, ideology and religion) of a society is quite apt, much as its postulation that political structure in turn affects the economic substructure is logical. Given the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian state, the theory suggests that the poor socio-economic conditions of women and youth account for their low representation in governance and politics in the country. Similarly, political power in Nigeria shapes the contours of social and economic development of the country. Consequently, women's and youth's restricted access to political and decision-making structures have repercussions for their access to other vital resources of society.

What this suggests therefore is that if politics were to be a game of numbers in Nigeria, women and youth would occupy a percentage of the political and decision-making positions commensurate with their demographic strength. However, the reality on ground shows that those (especially men) who control greater share of the economic resources of the state also control the politics. Therefore, those who control state power in Nigeria use it to divert all kinds of resources, including state funds. Although women have contributed significantly to economic productivity in the country, which are largely unaccounted or unpaid for in macro-economic calculations, they lack access to state resources and handicapped financially to engage in Nigerian brand of politics. The utility of this framework would become clearer as the discussion in this chapter unfolds.

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