Women and Political Participation in Ibibioland, 1950-2000

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Abstract

This study is aimed at highlighting women's efforts towards political participation in Ibibioland between 1900 and 2000. Women the world over have sought for political recognition viz – a – viz political participation. In Ibibioland, women strived to participate in familial, lineage, community and natal politics. This desire was founded upon the exclusion of women from political processes political manoeuverings. Employing a multidisciplinary approach while adopting the theory of enjoyment of critical social goods as well as adopting a narrative and analytical style, the study observed that in indigenous Ibibioland women participated in politics through such women's organizations such as iban isong, ebre and in spirit cults as mediums. In colonial Ibibioland, women's political powers and rights were circumscribed by the colonial administration as women leaders were excluded from participating in the government of the community. However, from the 1950s, women having been armed with education, began to seek for political relevance as they had become enfranchised about this period as such vied for political offices alongside men. The study concludes that

Ibibio women's active participation in politics was be traceable to astute, resilient and consistent political awareness. In effect women were able to scale many political hurdles – real or imagined – which loomed before them.

Political Development

Politics has remained one area of social life where Ibibio women constantly participated in. Such spheres of politics included familial politics, community politics, lineage politics and natal politics. In these spheres of politics women employed either the direct or indirect mode of exercising political power (O'Barr, 1984:142). Unequivocally, women's participation in politics in pre-colonial Ibibio society were expressed in women's social and political organizations such as *iban isong*, *ebre* and in spirit cults as mediums (Strobel, 1984:89 - 90). Although women participated in the political processes of the traditional Ibibio society, especially in matters that concerned women, however, political institutions which possessed overwhelming authority and power were mostly headed by male members of the society. In the colonial Ibibio society contrarily, women's political powers and rights were circumscribed by the colonial administration as traditional women leaders were excluded from participating in the government of the community (Wipper, 1984:69; O'Barr, 1984:142-143; Abasiattai, 1991:572). Emphasizing this point, Denzer (1988) in Abasiattai (1991:572) notes that

> in politics women lost their former influence because the British simply ignored women's titles and offices in traditional society when establishing new government and legal institutions. Women became invisible in the sense that their influence was overlooked and their opinions discounted.

From the above, it goes without saying that in traditional Ibibio society political power was diffused. That is to say, such processes were not

domiciled or resident in one individual or one level of authority as was obtainable during the colonial era. According to O'Barr (1984:142),

> …many African societies were divided into complementary spheres where women conducted women's affairs and men tended to their own, with neither controlling the other. African women have long been in charge of affairs in their realm; their realm was important to the society as a whole and was not subject to male control.

Be that as it may, we shall attempt in this study to examine how politics and political participation necessitated the social struggles of Ibibio women. It is a truism that in traditional Ibibio society men understood the indispensability of women even though "… traditional Ibibio society was a man's society, created by the men for the men, and dominated almost entirely by male interests. Women were seen mostly as necessary appendages with clearly defined and circumscribed roles which were calculated to advance the pervasive interests of the male" (Esen, 1982:79). Hence, gender relations were predicated on complementarity rather than on competitive lines (Esen, 1982:94).

However, in between the climax (which was characterized by constitutional developments in Nigeria) and denouement (which characterized the handing over of political and administrative powers to Nigerians) of British colonial rule in Nigeria, the essence of complementarity was lost upon the women as it could not avail women of the much needed development and recognition they so desired for in government. Put differently, the Ibibio society was no longer bound by the notions and ideas of complementarity hence, it was discarded as the deciding factor in gender relations became competitiveness. Women, therefore, armed with education which some of them had acquired at the time, began to seek for political relevance as they vied for political office positions alongside men. More significantly, to launch women wholly into the political sphere in Ibibioland and Nigeria at large, educated women

fought for the enfranchisement of women which they had been denied for too long.

This particular struggle, in the first instance, yielded some fruits when between 1954 and 1957 Margaret Ekpo was nominated as the first Nigerian woman into the Eastern House of Chiefs at Enugu to represent women's interests. In the second, following her participation in 1957 to 1958 in the Nigerian Constitutional Conference held in London, pushed for the actualization of Universal Adult Suffrage since at that time Nigerian women were not allowed to vote. By 1959 therefore, when Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe won the election to become the first Premier of Nigeria, he introduced Universal Adult Suffrage thereby granting to women the privilege to vote and be voted for (Ekpo, 2003:24-27; Effah-Attoe and Jaja, 1993:34-37).

Highlighting the roles of Chief (Mrs.) Margaret Ekpo in political participation and politics in general, Anya (2004:311) writes:

> …for several years was the sole politically active woman voice East of the Niger. She opposed oppressive colonial policies, inspired several Nigerian women. She was nominated member of the Eastern House of Chiefs in 1954; and became an elected member of the House of Assembly of Eastern Region 1960 – 1966. She was an educationist, and fought for the education of female children, and women's right to the vote.

Other Ibibio women who also mobilized women for political participation were Dr. Emma Brown, Nne Isong and others. The activities of these score of women traversed the colonial and post-independent Ibibio society. In post-independent Nigeria particularly as from the third republic, Ibibio women, though few, participated actively in politics as exemplified in executive and legislative offices which they occupied. Among such women were Barrister Grace Edim-Inyang, Barrister Ime Essien Udom, Professor

Ekaette Etuk, Helen Esuene, Obongawan Atim Atakpo, Eme Ufot Ekaette, Obongawan Eme Essien, Obongawan Iquo Inyang-Minimah, Obongawan Rita Akpan, and others (Akpan, 1994:219; Akwang, 2011:79-80). Ibibio women's active participation in politics may well be traceable to astute, resilient and consistent political awareness. In effect women were able to scale many political hurdles – real or imagined – which loomed before them. It must be emphasized that the political struggle of Ibibio women did not only come about through the instrumentality of political participation and processes but it also had substance from international regimes and conferences. In the light of these realities, the term 'politics' is used here in its generic sense to infer every institutional and/or organizational manoeuvres aimed at establishing a direct change in the political status quo of Ibibio women.

Evidently, from the 1960s women in Ibibioland did not so much as take part in politics and political processes. Prior to independence in Nigeria only few women like Dr. Emma Brown, Chief (Mrs) Margaret Ekpo, Nne Isong and so on, registered their presence in the Nigerian political scene. This group of women after independence however, facilitated women's emancipation – political, economic and otherwise. From the 1970s, women's active participation in politics transposed women from 'passive' to 'active' members of the society as these forerunners sensitized and mobilized women for political participation through such avenues as mass rallies, talk shows, group discussions and campaigns. This pattern of political sensitization was first employed by Chief (Mrs.) Margaret Ekpo at Aba for creating political awareness among Aba women (Effah-Attoe & Jaja, 1993:21).

The added impetus for women's active participation in politics as from the 1970s was the United Nation's intervention programmes and politics which were poised to address women's issues all over the world. This notion is derived from the fact that women's participation in politics, especially prior to the 1970s only meant women constituting the women's wing of political parties as they scarcely vied for political offices. From the

foregoing, it may be safe to say that the 1970s were instrumental to the awakening of political consciousness in Ibibio women. This assertion becomes a truism when weighed against the outcome of several research which have shown, at different times that the number of Ibibio women interested in politics began to show a steady but slow increase between 1979 and 1983 (the second republic). During this period for instance, Obongawan Rebecca M. Ekpo was elected as member into the former Cross River State House of Assembly under the umbrella of the defunct National Party of Nigeria (NPN) (Akpan, 2003:99). The period between 1979 and 1983 improved the political fortunes of Nigerian women as was evinced. This development stemmed from the Nigerian Constitution of 1979 and its successor, 1988 respectively. These documents espoused equal political rights for men as well as for women and emphasized their eligibility to vote and be voted for as long as such a person had attained the required age of eighteen (Uchendu, 1993:79).

In furtherance of the provisions of these Constitutions, Nne Isong introduced a programme, *Esop Ufon Iban*, which was meant to engrave political awareness in the minds of majority of Ibibio women. This was another avenue through which women gained political education (Ikpe, 2003:27). Consequent upon the political awareness which women began to garner, they began to have some representation in politics than they had hitherto. Between 1985 and 1993 for example, Ibibio women strikingly took part in partisan politics as their political appetites were whetted by such instruments as women's International Non-Governmental Organizations like the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and women's (indigenous) Non-Governmental Organizations like Federation of Akwa Ibom Women Association (FAIWA), Better Life Programme (BLP), Women in Nigeria (WIN), Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), Nigeria Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS) and others. Perhaps, in the light of the above it would be safe to say that women's non-governmental organizations sped up political awareness in

Ibibio women thereby emasculating the colonially entrenched non-women participation in politics.

Between 1999 and 2000 however, more political possibilities were ushered in for Ibibio women and the generality of Nigerian women. This era was heralded by the Olusegun Obasanjo-led administration which subsequently opened up new vistas of political participation for women since it favoured gender sensitivity. The political favour which Ibibio women, like other Nigerian women enjoyed during these years emanated from the implementation of the 30% Affirmative Action stipulated in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The Nigerian government, however, developed 'cold feet' with regards to the implementation of the 30% Affirmative Action which may be one of the reasons why women's organizations, civil society and non-governmental organizations worked assiduously towards increased women's participation in politics.

It is pertinent to sate here that the agitation for and wholesome inclusion of women in politics was well outlined in President Ibrahim Babangida's initiated National Policy on Women which the Obasanjo administration approved (Azuike, 2005:140). The approval of this policy according to Azuike (2005:140) by President Obasanjo informed his commitment to gender sensitive issues. Speaking on the said policy, President Obasanjo observes that:

> gender equality is one of the fundamental principles of the Commonwealth, and I would like to emphasize that gender equality is achievable and with your numerical strength, women can and indeed are making a different in governance in Nigeria. Given such numerical strength, Nigeria cannot afford to allow such abundant qualified and skilled resources of women to be wasted. This administration fully support the efforts to balance gender representation and recommits itself

> to exercise the necessary political will to ensure that more women are appointed at all decision-making levels.

To actualize the projections of the National Policy on Women, the Obasanjo administration gave some women political appointments just as well as others occupied elective offices. Ismail (2000:6) cited in Azuike (2005:140) observes that from 1999, the Obasanjo administration therefore adopted a gender sensitive approach to governance in pursuance of the goals of the National Policy on women which states thus:

> The National Policy on women aims at encouraging sectoral and national actions to better recognize and thereby, more effectively involve women as equal partners, decision-makers and beneficiaries in shaping a greater future for all the citizens of this nation. The National Policy on women is the gateway for instituting stable democratic governance, where women's input in national development would be recognized and appreciated. The National Policy document is therefore, women's security and a guarantee for a future full of hope and promise (Ismail, 2000:6 cited in Azuike, 2005:140).

Given the Obasanjo administration's recommitment to women's participation in politics, for the first time more women such as Deaconess Edna Umoette, Obongawan Atim Atakpo, Mrs Eme Essien, Obongawan Rita Akpan, Professor Ekaete Etuk; and Obongawan Grace Ekong were appointed as Commissioners, Secretary to the Akwa Ibom State Government, and Special Adviser to the Government respectively.

In our discussion of women and politics, analyses have shown that in Pre-colonial Ibibio society political power was diffused as women were actively involved in the political processes of the society. During this period, women conducted women's affairs and men attended to theirs. There was no question of the men overseeing women's affairs or women

the men's. In the colonial era women lost all power and influences they held and enjoyed in the pre-colonial era because the colonial government proscribed women's titles and offices which hitherto existed. The colonial government circumscribed women's political powers and rights as they were ignored when establishing the colonial government and legal institutions in Ibibioland. We can safely argue that during this period political power was domiciled in one level of authority which was represented by a man. All was however not bleak for women politically during this era as towards the twilight of colonialism, women such as Chief (Mrs.) Margaret Ekpo, Dr. Emma Brown, Nne Isong and Grace Edim-Inyang began to make in-roads into the political scene.

In the post-colonial era, women having realized how they were tactfully etched out of the domains of politics and political power rallied themselves for vigorous participation in politics. The first crop of Ibibio women politicians mentioned above encouraged women to compete with men for political space. Therefore, women began a slow but aggressive politicking. From the 1970s women's active participation in politics transposed them to limelight; the added impetus for this success being the United Nations assignation of the I970s as the Decade for Women.

Following from the above therefore, it is evident that women were actively involved in politics in the pre-colonial era. Ibibio women's political awareness and subsequent political participation took a slow but gradual upsurge towards the end of the colonial era. In the post-colonial era the political feelers which the few educated Ibibio women sent out began to yield positive results. For example, between 1960 and 1966 little or nothing was done to promote political sensitization among Ibibio women. Between 1979 and 1983 an infinitesimal number of Ibibio women dotted the political space. Consequently between these two epochs the political gains of Ibibio women were very minimal while the years between 1985 and 1993 and from 1999 up to 2000 bore hope and promise for women as renewed political fervour, vigour and gender-promoting programmes encouraged women to participate in civil processes. Having observed all

the stages of political agitation, sensitization, awareness and participation of Ibibio women from 1900 up to 2000, it is imperative to submit that Ibibio women's involvement in politics was not a function of happenstance rather, it was informed and predicated on prevailing gender relations among the Ibibio which seemed to arrogate power and associate authority with men thereby etching women out of the core avenues of power and authority since the latter begets the former and vice versa. Thus, women sought to prove that they too had a right to power, wealth and status since they discovered that men relied heavily on them (women) to achieve these goals (Obbo, 1980:5).

S/N	APPOINTMENT	NAMES	PERIOD	TENURE	WOMEN	MEN	TOTAL
1	Commissioner	Mrs. Bassey Noah	1979	Dr. Clement Isong	3		
2	Commissioner	Mrs. Rosemary Odum					
3	Member former Cross-Rivers State House of Assembly	Obonganwan Rebecca .M. Ekpo					
4	Commissioner	Mrs Affiong Abasiattai	1987-1988	Col. Tunde Ogbeha	2	21	23
	Permanent Secretary	Mrs Essien B. Otu					
5	Commissioner	Mrs Philomena Etuk	1988-1990	Col. Godwin Abbe	2	23	25
	Commissioner	Barr. Idongesit Ntem Isua					
6	No female appointee(s)	-	1990-1992	Wing Commander Idongesit O. Nkanga	-	25	25
7	Special Adviser	Obongawan Rita Akpan	1992-1993	Obong Akpan Isemin	1	22	23
8	Commissioner	Mrs Otu Usendia	1993-1996	Col. Yakubu Bako	6	18	24
	Special Adviser	Mrs Anne E. P. Effiong					

	Special Duties	Mrs Virginia S. Akpafiong					
	Board Member, Industry and Tourism	Mrs Nne Isong					
	Commissioner	Mrs Nene Etuk					
	Secretary to the State Government	Mrs Mary Obot					
9	Commissioner	Mrs Otu Usendia	1996-1998	Navy Capt. Joseph Adeusi	2	21	23
	Special Adviser	Mrs Anne E. P. Effiong					
10	Secretary to the State Government	Obongawan Rita Akpan	1999-2000	Obong Victor Attah	6	23	29
	Secretary to the State Government	Obongawan Grace Ekong					
	Commissioner	Obongawan Atim Atakpo					
	Commissioner	Mrs Eme Essien					
	Special Adviser	Deaconess Edna Umoette					
	Commissioner	Professor Ekaette Etuk					

Table 4.1: Distribution of Political Appointments in Ibibioland, 1987 – 2000

Source: Okpoido, E. (2015:76-78)

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