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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# WOMEN AND PARTICIPATION IN TRADE UNION IN NIGERIA: A PARADIGM SHIFT

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examined the participation of women in Trade Union in Nigeria. The main argument is that rather than attribute the low participation of women in Trade Union on biological, cultural, economic and educational factors, Trade Union and indeed women should be held responsible. The paper relied on secondary sources of data and adopted structural functionalism as an analytical construct which presupposes the fact that the structures (parts) that make up a system perform specific functions for the adaptation, stability and sustenance of the system. The paper notes that the anti-democratic posture of trade union and indeed the passive and incompatible attitude among women are responsible for their low participation in Trade Union. The paper recommends among other strategies that women should embark on intensive and extensive awareness campaign and see themselves as formidable and indispensable force to be reckoned with not only in trade union but also in the socio-economic-political landscape of Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of private ownership of means of production has unequivocally divided society into two main classes—those who own the means of production (the bourgeoisie or capitalist) and those who do not own the means of production (the proletariat or workers). Whereas the capitalists establish business outfits or organizations, the worker merely sell their labour power to the capitalist as employees. The employment of the employees by the capitalist not only leads to paid employment (as the employees are paid wages/salaries) but also social relations of production not only between the employer and the employees but also among the employees. The ultimate aim of the capitalist or employer of labour is to achieve optimum productivity and maximize profit. In order to achieve optimum productivity and maximize profit by appropriating the surplus value generated by the workers (employees), the capitalist or the employer of labour technically reduces the Total Cost (TC) of production by manipulating at least in the short run the variable cost (VC) of production. Thus the employer looks for cheap raw materials, pay little or no attention to the working condition of the employees and pays the employees mere pittance as wages/salaries. The exploitative tendencies of the employer of labour reduces the worker from being human beings to mere commodities that can be bought and sold. In other words the workers have been commodified. However, according to Marx and Engels (1970) the exploitation of the workers cannot

continue ad infinitum. This is in tandem with a popular adage that says, when you pass several times before a blind man, he will be forced to see. And again a people cannot be hoodwinked or short changed forever. Thus a time comes when the workers begin to generate consciousness and constitute themselves into a class-for-itself. Consequently, the precipitate of this class consciousness is trade unionism. Trade unions, irrespective of sex, gender, religion, ethnicity or racial creeds unite the workers as a bastion to the oppressive, repressive and exploitative tendencies of the employers of labour. Put differently, trade union protect the socio-economic and political interests of the members. Men and women who are members of trade unions are united by a common interest and are therefore equal stakeholders who should carry out trade union activities on a level-playing pedestal. It is against this backdrop that the paper examines the participation of women in trade union in Nigeria.

**Theoretical framework-structural functional theory:** The structural-functional theory serves as the analytical construct. It presupposes that a system exists which has parts that are interrelated and interdependent. These parts or structures perform specific functions in order to sustain the entire system. It follows that a political system is made up of many structures which are "patterns of action and resultant institutions (Ray, 2003). Thus, the mode of analysis is basically concerned with the issue of maintenance and regulation of the system. According to Merton in (Ray, 2003), a given function can be

performed by different structural arrangement and any given structural arrangement may also perform different kinds of consequences for the structure or system. Merton, (1949) in Ikpe (2010) explained that some patterns of actions are functional for the adaptation and stability of the system while other functions are dysfunctional. This means that the role performed by a structure can make or mar the system. The political system like other systems require the active and effective performance of roles by the structures in order to ensure system adaptation, sustenance and equilibrium. Aside from the governmental structure that performs the output functions of rulemaking, rule application and rule adjudicating, the input functions of political socialization and political communication are performed by non-governmental structures. Political parties, interest and pressure groups perform the input functions. Trade unions are pressure groups which perform input functions needed to constantly activate and buoy up the political system. Thus, trade unions are very important structures of the political system and its dysfunctionality can encumber the adaptation, stability and development of the political and socio-economic system of society. In order to enhance the functionality of trade unions, women who are equal stakeholders in trade unions should perform important roles as active members of trade unions. The utter neglect, alienation and relegation of women to the background in trade union activities is not in consonance with the collective bargaining spirit of trade union.

**Trade union in Nigeria: a capitalist perspective:** The history of trade union generally is rooted in struggle. Marx and Engels (1970) corroborated this fact of struggle when they said that “the history of all hitherto society is the history of class struggle”. Marx and Engels (1970) therefore urged workers all over the nations to unite against the oppressive, suppressive and exploitative tendencies of the capitalist. Struggle and indeed unity are the watch words of trade unions. Ananti (2004) noted that “in a developing society such as Nigeria, trade unions are veritable instruments for socio-economic transformation and class struggle”. Allan (1972) in Ananti (2004) said that “the unity of the employees makes the trade union a complete organization and as such constitutes a foundation of the trade union strength”. In Nigeria, trade union played major role in the struggle for independence and this has continued in the post-independence era. For example, trade unions in Nigeria fought against military dictatorship and contributed in restoring democratic rule in Nigeria. Trade unions also championed the struggle against unpopular government policies that are anti-people (Ananti 2014). Such unpopular policies of government include removal of fuel subsidy, retrenchment of Nigeria workers and the refusal of the government of the day to honour agreement (Ananti 2014). It is obvious from the foregoing that trade unions in Nigeria were not only focused and united but also generous in their struggle for the common good of all Nigerians. Trade union is a bulwark against the inhuman treatment meted on the workers by the capitalist. It should be noted that capital as a factor of production has some characteristics, such as self-augmenting, exploitative and expansionary. These features are also transferred to a capitalist mode of production. No capitalist is a ‘Father Christmas’ as he is interested only in maximizing profit and appropriating surplus value. The unbridled quest for profit maximization and surplus value appropriation makes the capitalist to be oppressive, suppressive and exploitative. Ryndina, Chernikov and Khudokormov (1980) captured this view succinctly when they said that:

“Labour is a process which invariably involves man’s active influences on nature. Under capitalism however, this process implies the consumption of the labor power bought by the capitalist. The worker works under the control of the capitalist, to whom the means of production and labour belong, for this reason, the product of labour which is created by the worker, is appropriated by the capitalist. As a result of the consumption of labour power, wage workers create value, which is greater than the value of their labour power. For instance, if the value of labour power is ten dollars, and the value created by the worker is twenty dollars, the difference, ie; surplus value is ten dollars. Thus surplus value is the value created by the labour of wage workers over and above the value of their labour power, and gratuitously appropriated by capitalists”. The Nigerian state as the largest employer of labour possesses the oppressive, suppressive and exploitative tendencies of the capitalist. The apparati of the Nigerian state are seen by the political elites as veritable means of amassing wealth. Consequently, ascendancy to power has become a do-or-die affair Ake (1996) reaffirmed this fact when he noted that the state became an apparatus of violence, had narrow social bases, and relied for compliance on coercion rather than authority. Electoral process became marred with electoral irregularities (Oddih, 2007), and as a result, democracy was basically thrown to the dustbin as the people no longer decide who becomes their leader.

The political elites through the instrumentality of the Nigerian state appropriate what was socially produced by the Nigerian workers and deny the Nigerian workers what is due to them by paying them pittance as wages/salaries and refusing to improve the working conditions of their workers. A faulty distributive mechanism which was orchestrated by the political elites places more of the state resources in the hands of few individual (political elite, the so-called cabals who are mostly economic moguls) while the rest of Nigerians, particularly Nigerian workers are wallowing in seemingly abysmal deprivation and poverty. Regrettably, like the deadly ebola virus, the anti-democratic virus of the Nigerian state has infested trade unions in Nigeria. There are cases of electoral irregularities and manipulation during trade union elections which led to paralleled executive councils and the formation of new parallel bodies. Trade unionists in Nigeria are no longer guided by the common creed of solidarity forever, rather unions have become platforms to seek for governing space, political relevance and personal aggrandizement. Also worrisome is the fact women who, expectedly are part of the struggle for the emancipation of the Nigerian workers from the lethal clothes of the oppressive, suppressive and exploitative capitalists and Nigerian state now occupy the back seat. Democracy demands that men and women should participate equally in the process of decision making and implementation. The question that boggles the minds is why is it that women are not in the mainstream of the activities of trade union in Nigeria.

**Women and participation in trade union in Nigeria: debunking the old argument:** The relevance of women in the socio-economic political development of any society cannot be over emphasized. The popular adage that says “train a woman and develop the community” is a pointer. However, women do not actively participate in the political process particularly at the gladiatorial level. The same low participation of women is also in trade unions. A cursory look at public offices and trade unions shows unfavourable dominance of males, (Parpart,

1988) in Oparanma (2014) noted that women when compared to their counterparts from other African nations do not take active part in leadership of labour unions, and if at all, their participation is very minimal. This passive attitude of women which led to their low participation in politics and indeed trade union has been attributed to some factors. The factors include biological factor which explains the biologically determined sex roles for male and females. While the women are expected to be in the kitchen and perform household chores, the men take up paid employment. The cultural factor justifies the culturally imposed roles on man and woman. Thus gender roles are a product of culture rather than biology. Culture, in some societies forbids the woman from going out at odd hours. Political factors inhibits women from active participation in politics and trade union. The political system in Nigeria is violent and it is believed that women cannot withstand the violent nature of politics in Nigeria. For economic factor, it is believed that women do not have economic power and this restrains them from having accesses to state power. Educational factor claims that education is skewed to the advantage of the men. And because education is a sine-qua-non for economic empowerment and by extension political participation at the gladiatorial level, more men dominate the process of decision-making. These factors mentioned above and indeed the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society are also responsible for the low participation of women in trade union activities.

Adefolaju (2016) noted that the effect of this inhibitive facts is that "it has been very difficult for women to enter modern-day wage employment and where they have, they are relegated to the background of the leadership and decision-making apparatus of the organization. As a result of this, women presence in key areas of the societal structure is but abysmal. For example very few of them are participating in politics, economic activities, especially in the formal sector, public or civil service and in the private sector of the economy. Much as these arguments or factors may have had grave impact on the participation of women in politics and trade union in the past, they are no longer tenable presently. Women are non-longer restrained by biologically sex determined roles. Most of the women are now bread winners of the family. Culture can no longer hinder women from active participation in trade union or politics. Women now occupy leadership positions and are very vocal at the family, community, state and national levels. Again, the cultural expectation that women should behave and dress in a particular way seems to be outmoded. It is no longer uncommon sight to see women in Nigeria wearing trousers, including married women in the local communities.

Furthermore, female circumcision as demanded by certain cultural practices is no longer in vogue. Women are also seem as competent breadwinners of some homes and pillars of community development projects either as individuals or as a group. Most of the traditional and religious practices have been swallowed by the ravaging western values and the virulent Christian faith. Where then lies the inhibitive hands of culture on women? It follows that gender inequality and indeed low participation of women in politics/trade union as a result of culturally imposed sex roles seem to have tapered off. In order words women are no longer culturally bound. In fact, in the true spirit of the Beijing conference, women have been "liberated". But what matters actually is not just the freedom from cultural restraints but more importantly is what they (women do with the freedom, it appears it is not yet Uhuru for

the women. The argument that the Nigerian political system is violent which scares away women as the weaker sex is no longer acceptable. The fact is that if women in Nigeria as far back as 1929, in spite of the brute force of the colonial masters were able to stage a protest, a violent one for that matter against the obnoxious and repressive colonial policies, then it will be absurd to continue to believe that violence can hinder women from active participation in politics and trade union. Whereas some men cannot withstand the sight of violence let alone participate in violent protest, some women join violent and aggressive secret cults, armed robbery gangs, kidnapping gangs and other aggression and violence prone groups. The economic empowerment monopoly by men is no more pervasive. Most women are now substantive breadwinners of the family. Infact given the economic realities in Nigeria, most men no longer marry women who are full time house wives, that is women who are considered to be liabilities. The cultural belief that the responsibilities of women do not exceed the house, the farm and market has been overtaken by modern values. Thus, it is no longer surprising to see women who are heads of corporate organizations and trade unions. The former chairperson of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), University of Port Harcourt branch is a woman-Prof. Anthonia Okerengwo. The likes of Ndi-Onyike Okereke, Dr. Violet Arene, Mrs. Kuforiji Olubi, Folake Solanke, Tokunbo Awolowo-Dosunmu, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and a host of other prominent women have proved beyond reasonable doubt that women can no longer be relegated to the background.

On the educational factor, it is obvious that the above mentioned women and others too numerous to mention are highly educated Nigerians. Thus, Nigerian women are equipped in all ramifications to actively participate in trade union activities. However, regrettably, women are the greatest obstacle they (women) have. Most women prefer hiding under the canopy of men sometimes as first ladies. Another point is the nonchalant attitude of women coupled with petty jealousy and the seemingly incompatibility that exist among women in Nigeria. This fact has led to the ineffectiveness of women to mobilize their fellow women to take up their rightful position in the gladiatorial activities in Nigeria. It is surprising to note that in 1929 Nigerian women rose up to challenge an existing order imposed by the colonizers and it is obvious that most of them did not have primary education, whereas now that we have plethora of highly educated women, yet they cannot challenge an existing order excluding them from the mainstream of decision-making even when the 1979 constitution prohibits discrimination on the ground of gender. The dismal poll result of the only female presidential aspirant on the platform of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) Mrs. Sarah Jubril (she voted for herself and had only one vote) at the presidential primary election, even when women were delegates at the convention is a pointer. The effect is that most women continue to subsume themselves under men as they feel that they can get anything they want through men even with their education and economic empowerment. This negative attitude of mind of women would continue to reinforce gender inequality and low participation in politics and trade union as they continue to play the second fiddle.

**Strategies to enhance women participation in trade union in Nigeria:** It should be noted that the principle that workers have right to organize themselves into trade union is premised on the International Labour Organization (ILO) convention of

1948 which emphasizes freedom of association and protection (Momoh, 2008). In a study carried out by Momoh (2008) 60.8% of the respondents have a positive view of the fact that unions constitution are not structured in a way favourable to female participation in trade union activities. While 37.7% of the respondents have a negative view of the influence of the unions constitution on their level of participation. The implication of this research findings is that trade unions which are supposedly democratic are at the risk of being hypocritical. Considering the democratic nature of trade unions and arising from the analysis in this paper, the following strategies should be adopted in order to enhance women participation in trade union in Nigeria.

1. Intensive and extensive awareness campaign among women
2. Constant interactive leadership training programmes
3. As a matter of deliberate policy and in tandem with the true spirit of the Beijing conference, trade unions should adopt affirmative action for women.
4. Trade unions should be democratized and trade unionists should be seen to be democrats in order to give voice to the voiceless. Democracy demands among other things, equal participation of the relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process. Thus whether a woman or a man, the fact is that both women and men are seen as indivisible formidable force for the emancipation of the workers from the lethal clutches of the capitalist or employer. The fact that more men participate in trade union than women makes the trade union undemocratic. Undemocratic trade unions cannot have the moral justification to ask for fairness and equity not only in the work place but also in the larger society.
5. Trade union constitution should provide for active participation of women.
6. Trade unionists, (including women) should always remember that struggle for emancipation is part of their lives. They should stop seeing trade unions as mere social gathering and platforms to gain political relevance and personal aggrandizement.
7. Women should stop playing the second fiddle, take up challenges, aspire for leadership position and encourage and love one another.

## Conclusion

Trade union by its nature is democratic. Democracy demands among other issues, that the people (trade unionists-men and women) should participate equally in the process of decision-making. The low participation of women in trade union negates the democratic nature of trade union. An undemocratic trade union is not only swimming in an ocean of hypocrisy but also lacks the moral justification to fight for the emancipation of not only the workers but also the entire Nigerians from the oppressive, suppressive and exploitative tendencies of the capitalist and the Nigerian state. The old argument that the low participation of women in trade union is due to biological, cultural, political and educational factors is outmoded, anachronistic and no longer tenable. Trade unions and indeed women should look inwards and purge themselves of anti-democratic, reactionary and incompatible behaviour which

have placed women ignominiously on a very low ebb in the rungs of trade union ladder. In order to facilitate the active participation of women in trade union, women should among other strategies embark on intensive and extensive awareness campaign and stop playing the second fiddle. Arise OH comrades for the time has come for you to rise to the clarion call and extricate the workers and indeed Nigerians from the lethal clutches of the oppressive, suppressive and exploitative capitalist (employer) and the Nigerian state. Solidarity forever.

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