

INCLUSION AND WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVITIES IN NIGERIA: MAKING A CASE FOR WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

According to recent research by the Centre for Citizen with Disabilities in Nigeria titled "Our Nigeria, Our Disability Report," there are approximately 31 million people with disabilities in Nigeria, with women making up the bulk of this population. This paper intends to explore the challenges women including Women with Disabilities (WWD) face in Nigeria as it relates to representation in socio-political activities in the Country. Women have clamored for increased representation and 35% affirmative action in political, and social inclusiveness in the activities of the country but have encountered some obstacles. It is noteworthy that this study, used secondary data collection were data were extracted from relevant literatures and the rights-based theory/ ideology was adopted as the best theory for the study. It examined the struggles faced by a small number of women with disabilities from 1999 to the present. Findings revealed that high levels of discrimination, inaccessibility, poor priority, and poor level of nomination form discount for women as the major challenges faced by women in Nigeria. These findings are noteworthy given the signing of the National Disability Law in January 2019 and the challenges faced by women in participating and seeking equity and equality in Nigeria. This study suggests that party systems properly open doors for women with disabilities to participate in sociopolitical activities and that legislative frameworks and policies attempting to include them should be thoroughly mainstreamed. Lastly It advocates for the National Assembly through its oversight function, should make tailored policies, awareness campaigns, and financial support mechanisms to empower and include women with disabilities in the socio-political landscape, advancing both gender equality and disability rights in Nigeria.

Keywords: Disabilities, Women, Representation, Government Policies, Social Inclusion

JEL CODE: J14, J12, D63, L78, C31.

1. INTRODUCTION

Involvement in political and public life, in tandem with the achievement of human rights, is an essential element of socially inclusive development. Participation in political and public life allows people with disabilities to participate in and have a say in decisions that affect them, their community, and their country. Such engagement is a crucial strategy of combating exclusion and discrimination, as well as reducing other hurdles that people with disabilities frequently confront. While the right to participate in politics and public life is well established in human rights law, people with disabilities are frequently denied that right in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons, often because of direct or indirect discrimination.

According to the United Nations (UN), stereotypes about disability frequently lead to discrimination against people with disabilities in decision-making processes in general, as well

as in the specific processes of voting, running for office, or participating in political parties' public outreach initiatives. Persons with disabilities frequently encounter a combination of legal, physical, transportation, and informational challenges, among other things. The role of governments in ensuring that people with disabilities can participate in all types of decision-making processes is critical, and it extends not only to election management bodies, but to all decision-making entities within government. The current module will look at the responsibility of States parties under the CRPD for safeguarding the right of people with disabilities to participate in political and public life, as well as set forth some guidelines (UN,2020).

The National Bureau of Statistics' 2019 Water, Sanitation, Hygiene National Outcome Routine Mapping Report states that the average household size in 2019 was five people, 17% of these homes are headed by women. Children under five make up approximately 9% of the population, while people over 50 make up 14%. According to the research, one in ten homes have at least one member who is disabled, and 6% of the population as a whole has a disability. This translates to over 11 million disabled persons living in Nigeria. This report reveals that Nigeria has women with disabilities and some are heads of a family.

According to the Centre for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD), there are over 31 million Nigerians with Disabilities (Guardian, 2021). And majority of them consists of and comprises of women. Women with disabilities are frequently excluded from active participation and leadership roles in political and social life in their home countries. The outcomes of the presidential and National Assembly elections held on February 25, 2023, have further highlighted Nigeria's disregard for the several treaties and laws it has ratified that are supposed to guarantee women's representation in politics. The low proportion of women in Nigeria's elected and appointed positions is closely correlated with the nation's degree of development. In Nigeria, the percentage of women in representative roles is not even close to 30%. Women with disabilities are still underrepresented in the National Assembly and other electoral offices. The World Bank's twin objectives of eradicating extreme poverty and fostering shared prosperity are directly addressed by disability-inclusive development, which is also closely related to the Human Capital Agenda. In order to be effective, the global development and poverty reduction agenda must address the political and socioeconomic inequalities of persons (women) with disabilities and guarantee their involvement in all programme stages.

It further pertinent and paramount to note that women with disabilities, have a global and national legal framework that tends to promote their inclusion and participation in socio-economic and political activities, but such policies and frameworks have been faced with poor compliance and implementation thus creating an uphill for women with disabilities, to fully participate in various social affairs in Nigeria, and that is what this paper hinges it's statement of purpose, tends to probe and investigated empirically.

The objective of this paper is to dissect the challenges faced by women with Disabilities (WWD) in political representation in Nigeria and make quality recommendations towards remedying their plights and giving them an equal basis to participate. There is an obvious gap that much works has not been done in the academic space, to mainstream the challenges faced by women with disabilities in Political participation, and this paper, intends to fill that gap.

Finally, Section 2 of this paper explained the three theories recommended for the study, Section 3 discussed the methodology and theory adopted for the study, while section 4 gave a breakdown of legal frameworks and provisions for the protection of persons with disabilities. Section 5 shows a historical overview of the level of representation of women in politics in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023. Section 6, exposed the challenges faced by women in the Nigerian political space, making reference with the experiences from '*Lois Auta*'. Section 7 of the paper

proffered strategic recommendations towards promoting equal representation of women with disabilities in Nigeria.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevant literatures were reviewed in the course of this study

2.1 Conceptual Literature

The concept of disability refers to a condition that limits a person's ability to perform daily activities or engage in social participation due to physical, cognitive, or mental impairments. Disability can be present at birth, develop later in life, or result from an injury or illness. In recent years, the concept of disability has shifted from a medical model to a social model. The medical model views disability as an individual problem that needs to be fixed or cured, while the social model recognizes that disability is a result of societal barriers that prevent people with disabilities from fully participating in society.

2.2 Theoretical Literature

The theories recommended for this study are as follows;

- a. **The rights-based theory** is a type of ethical theory under which the language of rights provides the basic terminology for ethical and political theory; it maintains that a democratic society must protect individuals and allow all to pursue personal goals. The rights of women with disabilities should be protected in an ideal society. Women with disability has the right to contest for election in Nigeria. Women with disabilities has the right of representation in the political and social economic activities in the country.
- b. **Feminist Theory** they argued that representations do not stand in a mimetic or imitative relationship to reality but, rather, participate in a system of signification whose various elements derive their meaning from what they are articulated or positioned in relation to, not from what they stand for. According to the feminist theory gender should not be a criteria for selecting or electing leaders into political positions. Being a woman in Nigeria should not be a hindrance to saddling the affairs of the Country be it at the State or Federal Level. There should not be discrimination of gender when it comes to elective positions in Nigeria.
- c. **Choice Theory** developed by psychiatrist William Glasser, Choice Theory states humans are motivated by a never-ending quest to satisfy 5 basic needs woven into our genes: to love and belong, to be powerful, to be free, to have fun and to survive. Specifically: Survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Human live by satisfying their never ending quest in life which can be power, freedom, fun, love, belongings. In the cause of satisfying this quest, there shouldn't be discrimination of gender, ability or disability. Human should be allowed the freedom of speech, association and relation. Human should be allowed to acquire power be it economic, political or social so far such power is not detrimental to the peace of the society. Human tends to fight, complain be sad when they can't satisfy these needs.

2.3 Empirical Literature

Gender inequality is endemic in Nigeria, where women have restricted access to education, work prospects, and resource ownership. High rates of poverty exacerbate this imbalance, especially for women and girls (Ogbeide & Efe, 2022). In order to achieve sustainable economic growth, social inclusion initiatives—like those that empower marginalised groups—are essential (World Bank, 2019).

One significant factor that contributes to gender inequality in Nigeria is the persistence of traditional cultural norms and beliefs. One significant factor that contributes to gender inequality in Nigeria is the persistence of traditional cultural norms and beliefs. These norms often assign women a subordinate status in society and restrict their access to education, employment opportunities, and decision-making power. Also, discriminatory practices such as early marriage and female genital mutilation further reinforce gender inequality (Akamike, Okonkwo and Ejiogu, 2023). Consequently, these cultural beliefs and practices perpetuate the cycle of poverty and limit the potential for economic growth and social inclusion (Akamike al., 2023).

In terms of lowering prejudice, raising retention rates among underprivileged students, and validating specific instructional strategies for disadvantaged populations, learning analytics has considerable promise for advancing inclusivity. An enhanced learning environment and better education can promote inclusivity and assistance for students with impairments (Khalil & Prinsloo 2023).

It's a common misconception in education that everyone will gain equally, that everyone has an equal chance of success, and that there are no inherent values or powers in the educational system. A prevalent viewpoint holds that all students may achieve success if they put in sufficient effort, exhibit perseverance and fortitude, and take charge of their education and prospects (e.g., Reed & Jeremiah, 2017; Warren & Hale, 2020). However, learners from marginalised groups, students with disabilities, and students learning English as a second or third language may exhibit grit and resilience quite differently. If we think of education as an ecosystem, then analysing how different values and powers influence that ecosystem requires critical analysis of how benefits are distributed among actors.

2.4 Gaps in Literature and Value Addition

Khali & Prinsloo wrote about how education can promote inclusivity and assistance with students with disability by helping them grow with dignity and strength and not limitation. They focused more on learning analytics in support of inclusiveness and disabled students. While Ogbeide & Efe, 2022 discussed on how the high rate of poverty exacerbates the discrimination among gender. To them, gender inequality endemic in Nigeria is majorly as a result of lack of financial resources especially among girls and women. In order to achieve sustainable economic growth, social inclusion initiatives—like those that empower marginalised groups, like the CBN, World Bank and other financial, Governmental and non-Governmental Institutions are essential.

There are significant gaps in the literature regarding effective strategies for increasing and promoting leadership roles for people with disabilities in developing countries. Information gaps also remain on how best to provide support within the context of promoting inclusive leadership for Persons with disabilities, and there is a need for additional research to understand how far people with disabilities have moved "beyond tokenism" and into authentic leadership roles (Beckwith et al, 2016). It is impossible to overstate the importance of rigorous and timely evaluations of methods used to increase political involvement and inclusion of women with disabilities.

3. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts the Secondary means of data collection. Secondary data collection involves retrieving already available data from sources other than the target audience. The paper derived sources from the internet, published and unpublished works on disability and women with disabilities representation in politics and social activities in Nigeria.

This paper adopts the Rights Based theory/approach as its theoretical scaffolding and pedestal. **The rights-based theory** is a type of ethical theory under which the language of rights provides the basic terminology for ethical and political theory; it maintains that a democratic society must protect individuals and allow all to pursue personal goals. The theory was propounded by Ronald Dworkin. As the name suggests, is based on basic human rights principles. It recognizes that: Disability is a natural part of human diversity that must be respected and supported in all its forms. Persons with disabilities have the same rights as everyone else in society. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704) in England, and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) in France, were among the philosophers who developed a theory of natural rights based on rights to life.

This theory implies that the rights of humans including that of Persons with Disabilities should be protected, promoted, and included in any society thus as to allow them to thrive and participate in socio-economic and political activities globally and in Nigeria. This theory is applicable to the paper as it creates the needed environment through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the National Disability Law for Women with Disabilities in Nigeria to participate freely and in an inclusive manner with others in the political milieu in Nigeria.

4. LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND PROVISIONS FOR THE PROTECTION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

This Section entails a review of various international provisions for the protection of the rights of Persons with disabilities. Notably, Nigeria is a signatory to some of the international conventions, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and its optional protocols.

Perhaps a good starting point, regarding discrimination and deprivation of the rights of PWDs is Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights which provides that:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”.

The inference from this is that all human beings, including PWDs, are born equal and should be treated equally. In line with the UN Conventions, the rights of PWDs must be protected to ensure that they can participate in societal affairs and make their own contributions to societal development. There should be no discrimination or deprivation for the PWDs.

Article 9 of the UNCRPD 2007 encourages States Parties to take steps: “To enable persons with disabilities live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life in the society”, and provides as follows:

- That States Parties shall take appropriate steps to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal access with others regarding their participation in activities in the physical environment, transportation, information, and communication technologies and systems
- That this equal access must extend to other facilities and services open or provided to the public in both urban and rural areas

- Measures are taken to identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers to access to public buildings, roads, transportation, and other indoor and outdoor facilities such as schools, housing, medical facilities, and workplaces that pose limitations to PWDs.

With reference to air travel, the import of the above is that airport/airline facilities and services must be accessible for PWDs.

Article 21 requires State Parties to act by:

- a) “Providing information intended for the general public to persons with disabilities in accessible formats and technologies appropriate to different kinds of disabilities in a timely manner and without additional cost;
- b) Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and all other accessible means, modes, and formats of communication of their choice by persons with disabilities in official interactions.

In terms of participation in political and public life, Article 29, sub-section (a) of the UNCRPD provides that “States Parties shall undertake “to ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote and be elected, inter alia, by:

- (i) Ensuring that voting procedures, facilities, and materials are appropriated, accessible and easy to understand and use.
- (ii) Protecting the rights of persons with disabilities to vote by secret ballot in elections and public referendums without intimidation and to stand for elections, to effectively hold office and perform all public functions at all levels of government, facilitating the use of assistive and new technologies where appropriate.
- (iii) Guaranteeing the free expression of the will of persons with disabilities as electors and to this end, where necessary, at their request, allowing assistance in voting by a person of their own choice.

Africa

Steps have also been taken at the Africa regional level for the protection of the rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Draft Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa. Article 17: Right to Participate in Political and Public Life, “Every person with a disability has the right to participate in political and public life”. Article 17(2b) mandates States Parties to ensure “that persons with disabilities, including persons with psychosocial disabilities and intellectual disabilities, can effectively participate in political and public life, including as members of political parties, electors and holders of political and public offices”. Article 17(2c) also requires States Parties to put in place “reasonable accommodation and other support measures consistent with the secrecy of the ballot, including as appropriate, by ensuring accessibility to polling stations and facilitating assisted voting, for persons with disabilities to enable their effective participation in political and public life”.

Nigeria

The Nigerian Disability Rights Law, called the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018 was signed by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari on January 23, 2019, after about nine years of persistent advocacy by disability rights groups and activists, with the Centre for Citizens with Disabilities playing a leading role in the struggle. The Act provides for a fine of N1,000,000.00 for corporate organizations and N100,000.00 for individuals or a term of six months imprisonment or both for violation of sub-section 1 of the Act, without prejudice to the victim (i.e. PWD) pursuing civil action against the offender(s). It is believed that this Act will go a long way in protecting the rights of persons with disabilities in Nigeria, although it may also be said that the mere passage of the Act is not sufficient and that there is still more to be done, through appropriate enforcement, to truly ensure the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities.

Part VI, Section 30, sub-section (1) of the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018, provides that: Persons with disabilities shall be encouraged to fully participate in politics and public life. Sub-Section (2) further provides that Government shall actively promote an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in:

- a) The conduct of public affairs without discrimination.
- b) Non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country; and
- c) Activities and administration of political parties.

In support of PWDs, Section 26 (1) of the Nigerians with Disabilities Act, 2018 provides that: in queues, persons with disabilities shall be given first consideration, and as much as possible, be attended to outside the queue.

Furthermore, the Electoral Law in Nigeria allows voters with disabilities to have the assistance of a person of their choice in casting their vote. The Independent National Electoral Commission's procedures allows for priority registration and/or voting for persons with disabilities (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC, 2011).

In reference to visually impaired and incapacitated voters, Section 54 (1) of the Electoral Act, 2022 states that

A voter with visual impairment or other forms of disability who is otherwise unable to distinguish symbol or who suffers from any other physical disability may be accompanied into the polling unit by a person chosen by him or her and that person shall, after informing the Presiding Officer of the disability, be permitted to accompany the voter into the voting compartment and assist the voter to make his or her mark in accordance with the procedure prescribed by the Commission.

Section 54 (2) further states that:

The Commission shall take reasonable steps to ensure that persons with disabilities, special needs, and vulnerable persons are assisted at the polling place by the provision of suitable means of communication, such as Braille, large, embossed print, electronic devices, sign language interpretation, or off-site voting in appropriate cases.

5. POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND BARRIERS AGAINST WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AND OTHER WOMEN IN NIGERIA

5.1 The Level of Representation of Women in Politics in Nigeria Since 1999

Since 1999, the percentage of women in the Nigerian parliament has slowly increased. In the 1999 parliament, only 3% of seats were held by women. This number increased to 6% in 2003, 9% in 2007, and 11% in 2011. Although the number of women in parliament is increasing, they are still grossly outnumbered by men.

In terms of political appointments, women fare somewhat better. According to data from the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, 31% of federal government appointments were held by women as of 2016. This is a significant increase from the 20% representation women had in 2010.

However, it is important to note that most women in Nigerian politics are members of the ruling party. For example, in the 8th Nigerian parliament (2015-2019), 97% of female senators were from the All-Progressive Congress (APC).

Despite these advances, Nigerian women still face significant barriers to full political participation. There are currently only 14 women in the country's Senate, and just 24 in the House of Representatives. In addition, only 6 out of the 36 state governors are women. These figures show that women are still vastly outnumbered by men in Nigeria's political institutions.

However, it is important to note that the number of women in elected office has been increasing steadily in recent years. In the 2011 general election, a total of 16 women were elected to the Senate, and 37 to the House of Representatives. This represented an increase of 7 and 13 respectively from the previous election. While the number of women in political office is still relatively low, progress is being made. For the 2023 election cycle, there were 13,725 men candidates and 1,544 women candidates.

Although the statistics on the level of participation of women in politics in Nigeria since 1999 are not readily available, the number of women in politics has increased significantly. This is due to several factors, including the increased awareness of women's rights and the need for greater gender equality in politics. In addition, the economic and social empowerment of women has contributed to their increased participation in politics. As the number of women in politics continues to grow, it is expected that the level of participation will also continue to increase, resulting in more gender equality in Nigerian politics.

5.2 Political Representation of Women with Disabilities in Nigeria

It has been estimated that 15% of the world's population has some sort of disability, and that incidence is higher among women, with one in every five women aged 18 and older having one. The Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) held its 12th session from 11 to 13 June 2019 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, with the overarching theme of "Ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities in a changing world through the implementation of the CRPD." The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which includes gender equality as one of its main principles, recognizes "that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between Persons with impairments and others." (UN,2019).

Leadership is usually described through stereotypically male behaviours, most often classified as authoritative in nature. Women continue to constitute a small minority of elected

representatives and political decision-makers worldwide . In 2019, only 24.3% of parliamentarians, 6.6% of presidents of state, and 5.2% of heads of government are female worldwide. (World Bank, 2019) There is a scarcity of data on the political participation of women with disabilities.

According to the UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development, the minimal data available suggests that women with disabilities participate and are represented in political leadership posts at an "extremely low" rate. According to the research, "The representation of women from organizations of people with disabilities tends to be low in national coordination mechanisms on disability matters," and their involvement "in national machinery for gender equality is even lower."(UN,2019).

Although the participation of people with disabilities in political processes is increasingly recognized as a human rights issue, little is known about how the key UNCRPD principles are translated into day-to-day practice, particularly in low and middle-income countries (World Health Organisation and World Bank 2011 in Virendra Kumar et al, 2018: 512). It's also unclear how factors like the current local context and individual qualities that interact with impairments to generate a handicap may help or hinder an individual's political life.

Virendra Kumar et al (2018: 527) find in a comprehensive analysis of the political engagement of Women with disabilities in Africa that there are different hurdles to political participation, and most sources agree that the barriers experienced by persons with disabilities are significant.

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) created a framework that defines the three dimensions that lead to political exclusion such as societal stigma, discriminatory legal frameworks and infrastructure, and positive rhetoric that is not backed up by political action (tokenism) (IFES and NDI, 2014: 34). According to the same publication, impediments to political participation can occur at any stage of the election cycle, including pre-election, election, and post-election (IFES and NDI, 2014: 34). Other characteristics that are frequently associated with disability, such as low educational levels and poverty, exacerbate participation and inclusion (Virendra Kumar et al, 2018: 533).

According to Sackey (2015: 375), there is widespread agreement that education plays a critical role in political socialization, interest articulation, and interest aggregation, all of which are necessary for political engagement.

Even though formal education is not a legal requirement for running political office, people with higher levels of education are more likely to succeed as politicians. A report by the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN Human Rights Council, 2016: 13) highlighted structural constraints as a major impediment to Women with disabilities participating in public decision-making. Education systems frequently fail to integrate people with disabilities appropriately, and their opportunities and capacities to participate meaningfully in public decision-making are limited.

In a highlighted manner, here are some overall challenges faced by Women, generally in their zeal to participate in politics in Nigeria:

- **Patriarchy:** It refers to a society ruled and dominated by men over women, which has resulted in women being viewed as mere housewives and non-partisans in family decision-making, let alone stepping out to compete for political posts.
- **Stigmatization:** Because of the way politics is played in Nigeria, it is thought that it is for those who have no regard for human rights and are willing to compromise their

virtue for immoral advantages. As a result, female political candidates are viewed as shameless and promiscuous.

- **Low level of education:** One of the problems is the low participation of women in education. The National Adult Literacy Survey, 2010 published by the National Bureau of Statistics revealed that the adult literacy rate in English in Nigeria is 50.6 percent while literacy in any other language is 63.7 percent (female adults aged 15 and above). This explains why most women are least qualified for political offices due to low educational attainment. This is also an effect of colonialism, where men were more favoured than women.
- **Meeting Schedules:** The time scheduled for caucus meetings to strategize and map out political plans either for the pre or post-election periods are odd and are not conducive for responsible and family women.
- **Financing:** Running for political office in Nigeria necessitates substantial financial resources. Despite waivers granted to women aspirants by several political parties, most Nigerian women who seek these positions are unable to meet their financial commitments. As a result, they were powerless to outweigh their male peers. According to a report by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) on Strategy Leveraging Agent Networks for Women's Financial Inclusion published in November, 2022, it stated that one of the most financially excluded groups in Nigeria are women. In 2016, the gender-gap in financial inclusion in Nigeria stood at 9.7%. This means that, only 53.5% of women, compared to 63.2% of men, were financially included through banks or formal non-banks. Financial exclusion of women in Nigeria also affect their political representation.
- **Violence:** Since the return of democracy in Nigeria, elections have always been marred by some sort of violence. Female candidates for various political parties are unable to survive political violence; as a result, women's political engagement is significantly curtailed.
- **Religious and cultural barriers:** Both Christianity and Islam do not give women much of a role in public life, and this is true of most cultural values, where women are viewed as culturally inferior.

6. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN THE POLITICAL SPACE: EXPERIENCES FROM LOIS AUTA

Lois Auta was born on April 29, 1980. She is the founder and CEO of the Cedar Seed Foundation, an organization in Nigeria that supports the engagement of women with disabilities in human rights-based development. She is particularly interested in disability-inclusive legislation.

Auta ran for the Federal Capital Territory's AMAC (Abuja Municipal Area Council)/Bwari National Assembly seat in 2019, and in 2022 she ran for the Kaduna State House of Assembly seat to represent the Kaura constituency under the All-Progressives Congress (APC) platform but lost in the primary to Nehemiah Sunday. As a physically handicapped female politician, she suffered discrimination.

According to her:

“I joined politics in 2017, after a friend invited me to a political meeting, thereafter, I received invitations for meetings with women in politics. I joined politics because I wanted [to create] space for women and people living with disabilities and to inspire other people with disabilities.”

In April 2018, I decided to run for office and informed my party. After several consultations with traditional leaders, students, and community members, I received enormous support and went ahead with my plans... I was nominated by my party to run for the House of Representatives because I was educated and qualified.

I see this as a huge opportunity because I have become a reference point for people with disability in elections. It's a stepping stone to my political journey. My family was also happy because being a woman with a disability, I'm changing the status quo for women.

My main challenge is inaccessibility to meet venues because I'm a wheelchair user. Some villages are harder to reach for me because sometimes you have to cross rivers. I also face challenges in funding, while most male candidates have sponsors" (UN WOMEN,2019).

In 2019, Lois contested in Abuja, and she puts her experience as thus:

"Yes. In 2019, party officials of my then party collected N100,000 from me a day before the election. I spent N2.5 million that year. A day before the election, I was cornered by some of my party officials. And the only money I had in my account was collected by them. I was told they wanted to use it as logistics for me, on the day of election. But the next day, they did not do anything they promised. Because I didn't get any reports from them. That money was meant for young people that had volunteered to be my agents on election day. I had to tell those volunteers the truth that although I had some money earlier, the party officials had collected it from me. I told them to just work out of passion for me. Some of them came out, some did not because they were relying on that money to transport themselves to the polling units. So, on the day of the election, nobody stood in for me, watched after my vote nor gave a report of what was going on at different polling units. So as far as I am concerned, that was electoral violence. If I had enough resources to mobilize party agents to do the needful, I know at least even if I did not win, but at least the number of votes I got would be a challenge to my contender, or to the person that won".(The Sun,2023)

Further In her 2022 experience sharing, she went on to talk about her bad experience in Kaduna State as:

"Bad experience in the sense that the Kaduna State APC Women leader, assembled all the female aspirants and asked us to step down for another woman. And this lady they asked me to step down for, did not even declare her intention in her unit let alone her ward or the local government entirely. She did not declare, nor campaign and she did no consultations. She only bought forms so she would participate in the primary and that was her mission. And I, who had been around communities, met with gatekeepers, duty bearers, and influencers to make things happen for me, was asked to step down for her on May 18, 2022.

When the woman leader called me on the phone to come to the party office immediately, we needed to talk. I asked, is there anything urgent? She said yes, she wants me to step down for Joyce. I was shocked, I asked was it because I am the only woman with a disability? Don't you know if you support me, the first woman with a disability running for a position in your state, you'll be writing your name in gold? She said no! I have to accept it and if I do not accept it, whatever happens, I should take it. That she wasn't going to support me after that day. Can you imagine a woman saying that to another woman? She threatened me on the phone that she's not going to support me if I do not step down.

Women should begin to see others as sisters, supporters, helpers of each other to achieve their dreams and mission on earth. And not stand against another woman. Can you imagine the delegates that promised to cast their votes for me within a few hours changed their minds after they were given money and promised all manner of things? They even swore to an oath that they were going to vote for the other person.

I was told that the person that eventually won lacks the capacity; he is not even literate but there's no problem. We will keep trying. This will never deter me, rather it will give me more courage to come out with bigger opportunities and on bigger platform next time". (The Sun, 2023)

She went further to state that:

"Some of us who don't have fingers cannot vote, People with albinism and visual impairment too. Not all polling units have access to Braille ballot paper. During my campaign, I had gone on a radio programme alongside two male opponents angling for the same position. A male listener called in to say there was hope for the men, but not for her. "Go home and sleep. People see disability and gender before the credibility and capacity of the candidate,". I lost that election but says she was inspired to keep trying to get more PWDs involved in the electoral process" (Aljazera.2022).

Excerpts from these experiences showed that she faced heightened multiple discrimination and barriers as a woman with disabilities, in her quest to participate in the political process both in 2019 and 2023 in Nigeria, just like Mrs. Lois Auta, other Women with Disabilities who seek an inclusive political participatory environment, are always discriminated and not given equality and equity in the process despite the available numerous legal frameworks.

In general, In Nigeria, women experience significant attrition rates at various stages of the electoral process, each phase presenting distinct challenges. Typically, analyses of women candidates' electoral outcomes focus solely on the final phase, overlooking the specific hurdles they encounter earlier. Consequently, challenges identified at the end of the cycle often blur phase-specific issues, complicating efforts to identify intervention opportunities.

Certain challenges persist throughout the electoral cycle, such as the issue of election financing. Many women candidates lack access to the financial resources necessary to sustain a political campaign. On the other hand, challenges related to navigating political party barriers are more pertinent before and during party primaries. Women who successfully navigate party politics

and secure candidacy positions often no longer face these party-specific challenges once they become their parties' official flagbearers.

The factors contributing to women's high attrition rates in politics evolve significantly during the general election and post-election phases of the cycle. During general elections, the primary factor affecting women's attrition rates is their access to major political parties and their ability to secure candidacy within these parties. Historically, access to dominant parties has been a predictor of candidates' potential for success. Additionally, finances continue to play a substantial role in post-election disputes, where many women who have already endured the rigors of a political campaign cannot afford protracted legal battles.

Throughout the entire electoral cycle, women also encounter substantial intimidation, sometimes escalating to physical violence.

7. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARDS PROMOTING EQUAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA

Women with Disabilities political participation and representation in Nigeria is an important issue. Women with Disabilities have been pushed to the margins of politics, despite enormous efforts by governments and nongovernmental organizations in the aftermath of the Beijing Declaration, which advocated 30% affirmative action and the National Gender Policy (NGP) recommendation of 35% affirmative action for more inclusive representation of women in elective and appointive positions. It is worth noting that women with Disabilities are still marginalized because of the country's leadership style.

Notwithstanding the difficulties that women with Disabilities face, their activism and advocacy, education of women, the positive attitude of successive administrations toward women's empowerment, and women's desire to participate in politics are all receiving a lot of positive energy as stated by Mrs. Lois Auta and other women with disabilities. This suggests that women with Disabilities political representation has a promising future.

As a result, this paper makes the following strategic recommendations:

- Political parties (APC, PDP, LP and others) should establish a support network for prospective Women with Disabilities aspirants by matching them with established female politicians who will serve as mentors and provide capacity building for young or aspiring women with disabilities politicians to enhance and develop them ahead of future elections.
- Political parties should allocate party representation forms for Women with Disabilities to have a seat at the National Assembly as well as State Assemblies.
- The National Assembly through its Senate and House Committees on Banking, Insurance and Other Financial Institutions should advise the CBN Governor on the need to ensure the effective delivery on the 'Framework for Advancing Women's Financial Inclusion in Nigeria which was developed by the Central Bank of Nigeria in collaboration with EFINA in 2020. Financial support should be given to women and women with disability through this scheme.
- The National Assembly should ensure that Women gets the 35 percent affirmative action by passing the 5 gender Bills. As well, the National Assembly through its oversight function, should make a policy that Women with Disabilities be given 5 percent out of it for equal representation in all the political parties registered in Nigeria.

- The President and Heads of States should create offices for Women with Disabilities to be represented in their cabinet. This will help persons with Disabilities in Nigeria have a voice, and feel incorporated in the affairs of the country.
- There is a need to create a mass coalition of women with disabilities support and advocacy organizations using OPDs, INGOs, NGOs and grassroots women with disabilities organizations to coordinate support and advocacy for fellow women with disabilities aspirants.
- The federal Government through the INEC and Political Parties should develop a supportive environment in which women may participate meaningfully in decision-making in a sustainable and effective manner that is free of all forms of violence and harassment.
- Accessibility is key and germane to all persons with disabilities including women, thus it is very important that political parties creates access at political meeting venues and campaign grounds for Women with Disabilities who intends to participate in the political/party process. There is also need for the party representation forms be subsidized for Women with Disabilities.
- Implementing a quota system at all levels of government, as well as identifying and engaging essential players, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission and political parties, to ensure strict adherence.

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