

The Cost of a Woman's Vote

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Lessons learned from the recently concluded Nigerian elections make it imperative to explain the importance of a woman's vote! Over the years, a woman's vote and voice have been camouflaged by forces well beyond her control, notably, antiquated mindsets about a woman's role, misconceptions about women in politics, lack of adequate resources to compete on an equal footing with their male counterparts, and of course the system's failure to promote equal access and participation for women. This practice is not endemic to Nigeria alone, for many well-meaning women have had to fight for the right to vote and be heard from different corners of the world. Nigeria was not absent in this bid for a woman's right to vote. From time immemorial, women have played an important role in shaping the world and making it a better place for all. Nigeria's history is full of forward thinking women who braved the shackles of tradition and fought for liberation even before the advent of western education in Nigeria. Women, such as Queen Amina of Zazzau, Moremi of Ile-Ife, Emotan of Bini, Mme Ikonna Nwanyiukwu of South Eastern Nigeria, laid the foundation for other women of valor to tread. More recently, we have had women such as Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Lady Margaret Ekpo, Mrs. Janet Mokelu, Hajia Gambo Sawaba, Madame Tinubu, just to mention a few, who not only fought for women's equal participation in governance, but also went against all odds to fight against practices like the arbitrary taxation of women, and ensuring that Nigerian women have the right to vote, and be voted for by both men and women! There are other numerous examples from historical books and events, but suffice to limit the examples to elucidate the point of women's contribution to the right to vote.

Despite the fact that more than 55% of women registered to vote in the last elections ***Women for Women International - UK Report, 2015***, much work still needs to be done for women's protection during this process. "For the women we work with, voter registration can be challenging; low literacy rates and

discriminatory norms can prevent women from making decisions.” Carron Mann , Policy Manager, *Women for Women International*. Other organizations who have been intimately involved with the Nigeria’s electoral process have also addressed the need for not only her vote, but her participation in the electoral process by stating that, “We however note with concern the low percentage of women candidates in the elections. We urge political parties to review the selection process to significantly increase the number of women positions of leadership and decision making” (2015-interim-statement-commonwealth-observer-group#sthash.9PiOScbO.dpuf)

In a country where women are in the majority population wise, it is imperative that their participation be supported by the few who hold offices and make laws that impact the lives of many. Women should not be coerced into making decisions that will impact them or their children negatively, simply because the powers that be want them to. I remember reading in horror, when on Nov. 17, 2014 the Nigeria’s Market Women Organization’s Chair, Madam (Chief) Felicia Sani, pledged to support the current president’s bid for re-election, by inciting her fellow members to join her. What is more, she convinced the under sold, under privileged and under informed fellow market women to contribute their very hard earned naira towards that effort. Let us be real here, who should give to the market women? Why will such an organization that claims to stand for women’s rights and understands the importance of women being economically independent subject its members to such a futile act? Are their votes really that cheap? At what cost should they give up this divine right? These are points to ponder as we pass the first tide and head towards a new wave of democratically elected government. This is the time to start planning and thinking of future elections as we reflect on past practice!

The right to vote everywhere, and in Nigeria in particular was a very costly endeavor. It did not come cheap! When you fight for something, it becomes very dear to you, to the point that you do not want to give it up without a fight. You cherish it because it is priceless, so no one can put a monetary value on it. When it comes down to using it, you use it very, very sparingly, and with much caution. That

is the nature of a vote! It is so costly and priceless that no one has more than ONE, regardless of socio-economic status. Only ONE vote!!! That vote can change the world, can surmount all obstacles if properly cast, can transcend barriers, make changes that nothing else can and indeed can be the difference between life and death! With something so costly, rare and unduplicated, you wonder why anyone would not want to use it to exercise her hard earned right to vote! The big women of valor before us understood the importance of this rare commodity and did not indeed waste their vote despite the societal pressure and cultural contexts in which they operated. They paved the way with much grace and integrity that it hurts deeply today, when you see women “selling” their vote to the highest and more often, the more powerful bidder...!

A woman’s vote is worth a lot more, and this is why: From time immemorial, women have always had a good sense of right or wrong, an innate insight into the mind of their homo-sapiens counterpart. The saying that “if you educate a woman, you educate the whole world” did not happen by accident. When a woman is educated, the knowledge that she acquires transcends generations and becomes so infectious that others want to emulate. The informed woman becomes a shining example for others to follow, and her children grow with such grace and common sense that set the tone for a healthy community! So giving up the voting exercise for the sake of something quite ephemeral is very costly. When a woman sells her vote, she sells her children’s future and posterity will seldom recover from the loss. Her vote is costly because she is better poised to promote social and economic justice, her vote brings about direct actions that could change the world in ways that money cannot. Her vote can get results that everyone can see and feel. Her vote is unbiased and not supposed to be influenced by the ruling party. Her vote as a woman and mother influences decisions that will affect the well being of future generation. Her vote can get citizens faster and closer to making public policies that will enlist the ability for all to act with will and grace.

Finally, a woman’s vote changes a community and brings about societal change not through a revolution, or demonstration in the street, but through a very

silent but powerful exercise that only takes the least amount of energy when exercised. Women, our children depend on us to represent them, their voice, their aspirations, and their dreams, so please let us not sell it to any bidder at all! Posterity will thank you immensely!!!