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## Gender Disparity in Students' Leadership in Some Nigerian Public Universities: Problems and Prospects

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### **Abstract:**

*This article is a critical evaluation and analysis of the disparity between male and female students' awareness, participation and representation in leadership positions or students' governance. The analysis is based on a panoramic view of the existing leadership positions among students, especially undergraduate students across some Nigerian public universities. Data collected from the Students Affairs Divisions of the University of Benin, Benin City (UNIBEN), Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma (A. A. U. E) and Delta State University, Abraka (DELSU) show similar constitutionally laid down positions in virtually all the Nigerian Universities. The time covered is between the 1990s to early 2000s as documentation on this was not available from inception to early 1990s. It was discovered that the positions were predominantly male oriented and male dominated and thus constitute 90% of male representation. Much is yet to be achieved in enhancing female representation as this still fluctuates between 10% and 22% in students' governance. This has left a gap that is yet to be filled as gender equality and equity in campus politics are the only key factors to national development.*

**Keywords:** Disparity, gender, governance, leadership, participation, representation, students

### **1. Introduction**

The origin of the Nigerian Universities dates as far back as the year of independence with only one, known then as the University College, Ibadan, now University of Ibadan. Two years later, the number rose to five and presently, there are well over sixty public universities owed by both the Federal and State governments. The private universities are not among this number. The increase in the number of universities also witnessed the increase in students' enrolment. This also enhanced the increase in female students' enrolment which has not affected significantly their awareness, participation and representation in leadership positions as it affects students' governance.

The word 'Leadership', according to the Lexicon Webster Dictionary (1877:542) is "the position, function or guidance of a leader, ability to lead. To lead means "to go before and show the way; to have a position of authority". This article is to establish the fact that leadership qualities are not only in men. If women possess leadership qualities, why are they not given the opportunity to lead, or, better put, why do they shy away from leadership positions? It will be pertinent to take a brief look at the concept of leadership.

### **2. The Concept of Leadership**

To lead means "to show the way to others, usually by going ahead of them". It also means "to be the route or direction that goes to a particular place or in a particular direction". According to Oladipo Fashina (2014: 50), leadership is "a complex process by which a person influences others to accomplish a mission, task or objective and directs the organization in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent". Leadership is acquired in the process of organizing people. There are good and bad leaderships. Leadership is learnt. It is not innate (inborn). Good leadership requires education, training, struggles, experience, self-examination, humility, patience, tolerance and endurance. Leadership requires principles. The importance of leadership role and training in the universities cannot be overemphasized nor can it be overruled. The role of women in position of leadership is equally pertinent especially as they have increased in enrolment as well as in admission.

It is of paramount interest to note that there has been a persistent gender inequality in students' participation and representation in students' leadership positions over the years in the Nigerian universities. Data collected from 1998 up to 2003 showed that female students' participation and representation are relatively lower than their male counterparts. Between the 70's and 90's, what obtained was 11% only of female representation. Between the 1990's to 2000s, there is a marginal increase which, Wale Olaitan (1998:80) terms 'tokenish' participation. This only rose to 22% and still fluctuates between 9% and 22%. This 'tokenish' participation and representation have not helped matters as there is still gross lack of

awareness for the need to have gender balance in student unionism and politics. The loss of awareness is even worse among the female students themselves. They certainly constitute a dominant force in the universities yet; males continue to dominate in governance. There is the tendency to ask a lot of questions such as, why do female students shy away from politics? Why do they have very low representation? How long will this under-representation continue? What difference does gender make to life and politics in particular? What difference will gender parity make in campus unionism? These questions are endless. They are pertinent because, the Ivory tower, which is a citadel of learning, is a good place for dynamic changes in the society. According to Hilaire Barnette (1998:39), it is only through education that women could participate fully in public life, on equal terms with men. Surprisingly, gender imbalance despite education has remained dormant and stagnant. This is because, Nigerian women, according to Nkechi Nwankwo (2001:1) have never had more than 3% representation in national politics even though they account for 51% voters.

The aims and objectives of this paper therefore are primarily to promote gender proportionate consciousness, awareness, participation and representation in students' governance. This paper also challenges the women folks in general towards having a positive attitude to politics. Suffice it to say at this juncture that leadership categories in Nigerian Universities cut across classes, levels, hostels, departments, faculty associations, other student organizational bodies, the Students Union Government (SUG) and inter university students' associations, as well as National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). These categories all have similar positions of leadership and constitutions. These positions are mainly nine which are prevalent in virtually all the Nigerian Universities:

- President
- Vice President
- Secretary General
- Assistant Secretary
- Director of Finance
- Treasurer
- Director of Welfare
- Director of Sports
- Director of Socials
- Public Relations Officer.

More positions are created to meet the needs of the associations/unions. Incidentally, the increase in the number of offices has not affected the number of female representation, instead, it has reduced the percentage of female representation. The position of Vice-President is usually reserved for the female students out of whatever positions are available. This automatically excludes the female students from the other posts by implication.

The male students blame their female counterparts for their exclusion. There is a nonchalant attitude of the female students towards campus politics. The male counterparts claim they have to purchase forms for their female counterparts in order to encourage them. Over the years, female students do not attend executive or congress meetings and so do not participate in policy matters affecting them. However, since the late 90's they have come out of the traditional position of a Vice President to vie for other posts such as Financial Secretary/Treasurer, Secretary General or Assistant Secretary General and even president. At Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (NAU or UNIZIK), the post of Treasurer is reserved for the female instead of the conventional post of Vice President. It is believed that women are better custodians in financial matters. This explains why their representation increased to 22%. This is encouraging but is still very far from balancing the gender participation and representation. A lot of reasons has been advanced to be responsible for the lack of awareness, poor participation and very low representation. These reasons constitute problems and constraints and so will be considered as such.

### 3. Statistical Presentation of Students' Enrolment/Admission

#### 3.1. Women Enrolment in Higher Education

According to Gunawardena et al (2004: 4), cited in ASUU Leadership Training Manual (2017: 250) "the average rate of female candidates entering Nigerian Universities by 2002 was 39% (NUC, 2002)". According to the same Leadership Training Manual, a summary of JAMB Admission figures conducted in 2002 by NUC as reported by JAMB for 2001 established the following:

Year	Male Application	Female Application	Total Application	Male Percentage	Female Percentage
2000/2001	268,671	198,891	467,562	57.5%	42.5%

Table 1: JAMB Application 2001

Year	Males Admitted	Females Admitted	Total Admission	Male Percentage	Female Percentage
2000/2001	31,271	19,006	50,277	62.2%	37.8%

Table 2: JAMB Admission 2001

Tables 1 and 2 above show that the number of applications to tertiary institutions always had males outnumbering the females. This is equally replicated in the percentage. This established the fact that female enrolment and admission show the colonial disparity in the education of the female child.

A statistical analysis of gender representation in samples of Faculty Associations from the University of Benin; Student Union Government (SUG) from three main universities and NANS officers, will show what this representation looks like. However, there has been some limitations especially on documentation. There is no proper documentation of past offices in student union leadership. Most data collected from students' Association Secretariats are from letter headed papers where the executive members' names or photographs are inscribed. One therefore had to rely on oral interviews to fill up such lacuna.

Year	No of males	No of Females	Total	Male percentage	Female percentage
1998/1999	11	3	14	78.6%	21.4%
1999/2000	6	1	7	85.7%	14.3%
2000/2001	11	2	13	84.6%	15.4%
2002/2003	11	2	13	84.6%	15.4%

Table 3: Statistical Analysis of Faculty of Arts Students Association (FASA), University of Benin

Source: FASA Secretariat

The Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City did not have a common association until 1997 when the students saw the need for it. It is a faculty distributed in the two Campuses of the University of Benin (Ekenwan and Ugbowo). There are two Vice Presidents, one for each of the two Campuses. This brings the numbers of Vice President to two. Apart from the two Vice Presidents, there was a female welfare officer for one of the Campuses in 1998/1999. In 1999/2000, the positions were only seven because it was a caretaker committee with only one female. By 2000, the post of provost had been expunged, and the total officers became 13. Out of the thirteen, only one was a female, the vice-president (Ugbowo campus). The vice-president (Ekenwan campus) was a male and acted as the president in that campus. They jettisoned the convention of the vice-president being a female. They did not see the need to insist on a female student there because none vied for the post.

Year	No of males	No of Females	Total	Male percentage	Female percentage
1998/1999	8	1	9	89%	11%
1999/2000	8	1	9	87%	11%
2000/2001	7	2	9	78%	22%
2002/2003	10	1	11	91%	9%

Table 4: Social Science Students' Association (SOSSA), University of Benin

Source: SOSSA Secretariat

Social Science Student's Association (SOSSA) has been in existence before 1998. The office of the Deputy Governor (equivalent to Vice President) is reserved for females. However, in 2000/2001, they equally produced a female Assistant Secretary General. In 2002/2003, the offices increased to 11, yet, no provision was made to increase the female quota. This reduced the female percentage further from 11% to 9%. One would have thought that the effect of globalization would have affected this set of students, but alas, it did not.

Year	No of males	No of Females	Total	Male percentage	Female percentage
1998/1999	7	2	9	78%	22%
1999/2000	NOT AVAILABLE (Caretaker Committee)				
2000/2001	8	1	9	89%	11%
2002/2003	9	1	10	90%	10%

Table 5: Union Government (SUG), University of Benin, Benin City

Source: SUG, UNIBEN Secretariat

Table 5 above presents the gender distribution of the Students Union Government (SUG) Officials at the University of Benin, Benin City from 1998 to 2003. It was only in 1998/1999 academic session was there two female representatives giving 22% of the total representation. In 1999/2000, the SUG elections were cancelled and a caretaker committee was instituted

comprising of Hall Representatives and Faculty Presidents. By 2002/2003, there was a reduction in female percentage because the office of Attorney General was created and no provision was made for more female quota.

Year	88/89	99/90	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94	95/96	97/98	98/99	99/2000
Male	6,605 (71%)	6,223 (66%)	6,849 (68%)	8,238 (72%)	8,323 (66%)	9,687 (73%)	11,261 (69%)	11,543 (64%)	12,363 (64%)	12,348 (62%)
Female	2,650 (29%)	3,140 (34%)	3,142 (32%)	3,254 (28%)	4,330 (34%)	3,527 (27%)	5,020 (31%)	6,571 (36%)	7,030 (36%)	7,457 (38%)
Total	9,255	9,363	9,973	11,492	12,655	13,212	16,281	18,114	19,386	19,805

Table 6: Total Full-Time Students Enrolment in UNIBEN from 1988/89-1999/2000 According to Gender

Source: UNIBEN Statistical Digest, p. 5

The female undergraduate enrolment from 1988-2000 in Table 6 above is between 27% and 38%. If between 98/99 and 99/2000 there is a significant rise in the gender enrolment (36%) and (38%) respectively, this is not adequately represented in the SUG from 98/99. Rather, female representation decreased, whereas, more offices were created while female quota did not change.

### 3.2.. Total Full-Time Student Enrolment for Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences of the University of Benin According to Gender

Year	88/89	99/90	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94	95/96	97/98	98/99	99/2000
Male	765 (55%)	598 (50.3%)	840 (62.4%)	843 (58.2%)	808 (58.1%)	713 (56.4%)	794 (54.2%)	588 (45.3%)	599 (41.5%)	767 (43.5%)
Female	628 (45%)	591 (49.7%)	506 (37.6%)	607 (41.8%)	660 (44.9%)	553 (43.6%)	672 (45.8%)	710* (54%)	845* (58.5%)	995 (56.5%)
Total	1,393	1,189	1,346	1,450	1,468	1,266	1,466	1,298	1,444	1,762

Table 7: ARTS

(UNIBEN Statistical Digest) p. 5

Year	88/89	99/90	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94	95/96	97/98	98/99	99/2000
Male	1,032 (76.8%)	752 (63.5%)	829 (61.6%)	1,295 (75.8%)	1,498 (62.5%)	1,881 (74%)	280 (71.7%)	2,207 (60.8%)	2,375 (60.5%)	2,440 (59.1%)
Female	312 (23.2%)	433 (36.5%)	518 (38.4%)	414 (24.2%)	900 (37.5%)	661 (26%)	111 (28.3%)	1,426 (39.2%)	1,557 (39.5%)	1,695 (40.9%)
Total	1,344	1,189	1,347	1,709	2,398	2,542	391	3,633	3,932	4,135

Table 8: Social Science

Source: UNIBEN Statistical Digest, p. 5

It is interesting to note from these tables above (7 & 8), that, in spite of the fact that female enrolment in the Faculty of Arts for 1997-2000 was higher than the male (above 50%), it was only in 1998/99 that it affected mildly the female quota which still was not more than 22% representation. It is understandable in social science where female enrolment is far below that of the male. The increase in 97-2000 did not affect female representation.

Year	No of males	No of Females	Total	Male percentage	Female percentage
1998/1999	8	1	9	89%	11%
1999/2000	8	1	9	89%	11%
2000/2001	7	2	9	89%	22%
2001/2002	8	1	9	89%	11%
2002/2003	8	1	9	89%	11%

Table 9: Student Union Government (SUG), Delta State University, Abraka

Source: Oral Interview of DELSU Students

Table 9 shows gender distribution of SUG, Abraka. The rate of participation at elections in Abraka had increased for the females, although, it is not reflected in the representation, because some of female contestants lost their elections. However, there is a more consistent quota representation of 11% to 22%. The same explanation goes for SUG, AAU Ekpoma in table 10.

Year	No of males	No of Females	Total	Male percentage	Female percentage
1998/1999	8	1	9	89%	11%
1999/2000	8	1	9	89%	11%
2000/2001	8	1	9	89%	11%
2001/2002	8	1	9	89%	11%
2002/2003	7	2	9	78%	22%

*Table 10: Student Union Government (SUG), Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma  
Source: Oral Interview of A.A.U.E Students*

The same trend could be seen at the Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma. University of Benin and Ambrose Alli University, Ekpomaboth lost 2001/2002 academic session due to Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strike.

Year	No of males	No of Females	Total	Male percentage	Female percentage
1995/1996	13	1	14	92.4%	7.6%
2000	14	Nil	14	100%	0%
2001	13	1	14	92.4%	7.6%
2002	13	1	14	92.4%	7.6%

*Table 11: National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS)  
Oral interview of NANS activists; NANS Website only has two officers in 2002*

From 1995 to 1999, there were two factions of NANS and so it was very difficult getting the official representatives of NANS. However, by 1995/96, the faction available was that led by a female president, Miss Comfort Idika. There is poor documentation of students' representatives at this level, so, efforts made to get the leadership positions from 1971 to 1994 was fruitless. One has access only to the presidents. In 2000, there was no female representative at all. It is worth noting that the officers at NANS level are reminiscent of Political Officers in the country. This explains why this paper did not use NANS offices to calculate the percentage. Rather SUG offices were used since they are more conventional even with most students' associations posts. NANS Representation for female quota is nothing to write home about. The increase in female enrolment did not have any significant effect on the number of female representatives on Campus. Rather, it is a culturally embedded problem. The discussion of these problems is embedded in the age-long tradition, customs and culture.

#### 4. Problems and Discussions

The leadership system in the Nigerian Universities is handicap in three main areas as it concerns females. These areas are absolute lack of awareness otherwise known as lack of 'prise de conscience', poor participation and very minimal representation. There is a general lack of awareness among female students because of their nonchalant attitude towards governance in school. The lack of 'prise de conscience', that is, consciousness, is embedded in the social/cultural values and norms which have been 'forced' on them. These constitute impediments to their rise and aspiration in students' activism on campus. Once the awareness is dampened and hampered, it is actually difficult to wake the female students from such political slumber to actively participate in what affects them. This obviously explains why the representation is very low. Over the years, female students have been discouraged by the seeming passive roles their representatives have played. It is on record that NANS produced the first and only female President in 1995/96 session in the person of Comfort Idika (Ogunye et al 1998: 138). Foreign Languages Students Association (FOLSA), in the University of Benin, produced a female President in 1999/2000. These are very rare cases either due to their intelligence or pro-activeness. The three-dimensional areas the problems have spread are further broken down into sociocultural, political, economic, religious and educational constraints. These constraints are further embedded in the traditions and culture of the people that are patriarchal in nature.

#### 5. Socio-Cultural Constraints

Over the years, women have always been relegated to the background and have been regarded as second-class citizens because they have always occupied the place of second fiddle. Most societies and cultures have always kept them in the kitchen and at home as baby-seaters. They were to be seen and not to be heard. The status of women dates back to the ancient Greeks (Barnett, 1998:3). From time immemorial, "power in society has been accorded to men and women have been traditionally confined to the domestic sphere of life" (Barnett, 1998:31). Many women, consciously and unconsciously support these masculine views because they had been conditioned to accept these cultural and social norms and even frown at fellow women who dare to challenge them. Culturally, women are regarded as sex machines and reproduction machines. Thus, the ultimate goal of the African woman for instance is that of motherhood. This accounts for the numerous female students who are withdrawn from schools in order to marry. Even though Education and modernization have improved the lots of the average Nigerian girl, the cultural mentality remains with those who attain tertiary education, especially the university level. This is because the Nigeria girl is born into a culture of male supremacy (Aina, 1998:8) and so accepts it so. Many women still believe in female passivity even in campus activities. There is no encouragement from fellow female members because of the

belief in feminine passivity. Instead, parents warn their female children not to participate in campus politics; rather, they encourage them to mind their academic pursuits. This can be said to be responsible for the dwindling nature of women's participation in politics. The grassroots discouragement goes a long way in making or unmaking the political aspiration of the female student.

## 6. Political Constraints

We are in a world of male supremacy and dominance. Power from time immemorial has been accorded to them thus establishing female inferiority complex. In the words of Wale Olaitan (1998:73):

The reality of the inferior position assigned to women in society effectively rules them out of contention for many important positions, which should logically be reserved for the 'superior' men. The inferiorisation of women has been so entrenched and institutionalized especially in developing societies, that the growing concern with the plight of women has not been able to easily dislodge it.

Women have been made to believe that they are only meant to provide supporting and supportive roles to men. In other words, they are 'naturally' passive, because societies, traditions and cultures have made it so. This explains why it is difficult to have a woman president in associations where men are more in number. This also explains why many women aspire to play the supporting and supportive roles as wives to Presidents, Governors, Politicians, etc. in order to assume the role of 'First Ladies'. Female representatives who occupied the posts of Vice President or Treasurer, as the case may be, also saw themselves as supportive and supporting the Executive Bureau. Majority of them are yet to play active roles. This is what Wale Olaitan (1998:80) regards as 'informal positions'. According to the same author (1998:73), "women are essentially disadvantaged in the society..." This is why female students believe that politics is not for them. Moreover, they also believe that politics is a dirty game for 'dirty people'. Cultism on campus has worsened its case because politics will only expose them further to violence in all its ramifications. The few pro-active females are discouraged by the low representation in leadership position because, they are meant to cluster around one post and leave the others for the men. This is very discouraging. A major political handicap is lack of money. Politics even on campus has become expensive. The female folks do not possess the financial wherewithal and were not ready for 'godfatherism'. This is another hindrance, if not checked immediately; a new crop of female activists will be sponsored only to sell their birthrights for prostitution. Economic empowerment is a force to be reckoned with in politics and governance. How many women have economic power?

### 6.1. Economic Constraints

Today, women are acquiring economic power and are thus becoming financially independent. Despite their economic power, they are still hindered because they do not occupy positions where policies affecting them are made. Whereas, the male students could maintain a job while in school, it is usually difficult for the female student to do so and excel academically. Rather, one can come across many female students who combine their studies with marriage and motherhood and so would not like to add more burdens on themselves by participating in politics. They are thus economically handicapped usually to carry out any campaign for their elections. The male folks still come to their rescue when it comes to financial sponsorship. The male folks still come to their aid here and an understanding is reached which reduces the activeness of the female to that of a second fiddle. The male folks have complained about the nonchalant attitude of their female counterparts who do not attend executive meetings. One would have thought that the level of education should have had positive impact on their outlook but it is not so. The level of education of the female child determines the level of her financial status.

### 6.2. Educational Constraints

In as much as more women aspire for higher education these days, their participation is not as high in the primary school education tier (Alao, 1998:83). According to the latter, "the higher the educational ladder, the lower the level of female involvement (Alao, 1998:85). The number of Nigerian females attaining University education has increased. This increase has not in any way affected the level of awareness, participation and representation of the female students in leadership positions. Very few women occupy key positions in all spheres of life. There are more women in the lower cadre. Socio-cultural inhibitions affect female education and their subsequent employment. The level of educational exposure has not affected significantly the political consciousness of the female folks. If it did, there would have been a massive increase in female participation. The female students are afraid to be called 'Acada' because pro-activeness on their part is regarded as 'over civilization'. They tend to lose the respect of their peers as this also exposes them as morally decadent in the society. Gender stereotyping, which is, a prominent feature of Nigerian traditional education, according to Alao (1998:93) has not enhanced female participation; rather, it increased and encouraged passivity. One important fact still remains that the lateness of female education during the colonial period contributed immensely to the gender disparity in students' enrolment and admission. The stereotyped nature of educational subjects specifically and specially ascribed the females did not give her much choice. Instead, it inhibited her. Some of the major inhibitions are religious in nature.

### 6.3. Religious Constraints

One recognizes three main religions in Nigeria. They are African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam. None of these religions encourages gender equality. They believe women should be ruled and not rule. Women's leadership roles

amount to usurping of authority, which 'naturally' belongs to men. Incidentally, Nigerian women are very religious beings. Their religious beliefs thus expose them to exploitation, oppression, suppression and intimidation. It is this same situation the average Nigerian female student finds herself. To break loose from this traditional bondage, for the female student who damns the consequences to participate in active politics, amounts to revolt. The religious constraints affect their awareness, participation and representation which they believe is god ordained. The conventional training given to the average female child is such that prepares her for marriage. This explains why there is a perpetual decline in female enrolment and admission because the higher they tend to attain, the more the drop-out as a result of marriage.

## 7. Prospects

Are there prospects for the female students? What is the future of female participation and representation in the Universities? There is a concerted effort to increase female students' enrolment due to economic pressure. Many female students shun early marriage in order to embrace higher education.

The formation of female professional associations stem from the education of the female child which also give more awareness of the plight of the average woman in the society. One expects more reaction, more awareness, more participation and more representation. It is interesting to note that female students' enrolment and admission have increased and advocacy are now on-going as more female students now see the need to take active participation in campus politics. They are beginning to come together and to chat new ways for themselves.

## 8. Conclusion

The education of the female child has contributed to the emancipation of women from traditions that have inhibited their awareness, participation and representation in public and private lives. Women in position of authority still make their mark like the late Dr. (Mrs) Dora Akinyuli, former Director of NAFDAC and former Minister of Information in Nigeria, Dr NdiOkereke, Dr (Mrs) Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and a host of others that space will not permit us to cite. It is no longer news that women are performing in their chosen fields of endeavor. Female participation in campus politics will curb cultism and fraud among the males especially if there is equity and balance. It is only through education that women can participate fully in public life, on equal terms with men and have adequate representation in leadership positions. Gender proportionate representation in campus politics is a steppingstone to gender balanced representation in public life. It is the root to gender equality in Nigerian politics and will promote the full participation of women in departmental and faculty associations as well as in Student Union Government in general and National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). We expect positive change for women. Full representation of women will enhance the opportunities for role modeling among women. Equitable gender distribution is healthy for a smooth running of students' governance. This article therefore advocates gender balance among student government officers. The historical context of female sensitivity has to change so as to accommodate and increase the awareness, participation and representation of women in identifiable leadership positions not only within the Universities but within the society as a whole. Currently, some associations that manage to produce female presidents still do not have a balanced representation as the female folks still shy away from holding public offices.

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