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WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN PERSPECTIVE

Session discourse - Diversity and inclusion are essential for a thriving society, and women's participation in various fields is crucial for achieving this goal. This discussion explores the impact of women in Politics, business, the legal profession and the judiciary highlighting their unique perspectives and contributions.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The discourse on diversity and inclusion has become increasingly significant in contemporary society. Diversity entails the presence of varied identities, experiences, and perspectives within a particular setting, while inclusion is the deliberate effort to ensure that these differences are respected and that all individuals are given equal access to opportunities and decision-making.

Within this framework, the role of women in politics, business, law, and the judiciary cannot be overemphasized. Women's participation is not simply a matter of justice and equality, but a catalyst for social, economic, and political progress. Around the world, studies show that societies that promote women's inclusion enjoy stronger democracies, more equitable justice systems, and more sustainable economies.

Nigeria is also bound by domestic and international legal frameworks that mandate gender equality and women's inclusion. Domestically, Section 42 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex, while Section 14(3) emphasizes inclusivity in governance. Statutes such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2 0 1 5 (VAPP Act), the Electoral Act, 2022, and the National Gender Policy, 2006 provide further legal backing for women's rights and representation.

Internationally, Nigeria has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), adopted theBeijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), and signed the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol, 2003). Nigeria is also committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, particularly Goal 5) on gender equality. Collectively, these frameworks oblige Nigeria to take concrete measures to ensure women's full participation in politics, business, law, and the judiciary.

2.0 WOMEN IN POLITICS

Politics is a vital avenue through which citizens participate in decision-making and governance. Women's participation in politics is therefore central to representative democracy. Historical examples abound of women who shaped political history, such as Yaa Asantewaa of Ghana, who courageously led her people in resisting British colonialism, and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria, who organized market women and challenged colonial authorities, laying the groundwork for women's involvement in governance.

In Nigeria's contemporary landscape, the journey has been one of slow progress. Women such as Oby Ezekwesili, a former minister and World Bank Vice President, and Senator Remi Tinubu, who has contributed immensely to legislative debates, show how women enrich governance. Yet, women currently occupy less than 10% of elective offices in Nigeria, one of the lowest rates in Africa.

This disparity has sparked calls for reform, leading to the Reserved Seats Bill, a proposed constitutional amendment that seeks to guarantee women a minimum number of seats in the legislature. While controversial, it reflects the urgency of correcting systemic imbalances.

Domestically, the Electoral Act, 2 0 2 2 encourages inclusivity in political participation, while Section 4 2 of the 1 9 9 9 Constitution provides that no citizen shall be discriminated against on the basis of sex in accessing political opportunities. Internationally, the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) urges states to ensure women's equal participation in political decision-making, while the CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation No. 23 calls for temporary special measures, such as quotas. Regionally, the Maputo Protocol (Article 9) mandates equal participation of women in political life.

At the grassroots, women play crucial roles as mobilizers, peacebuilders, and advocates for community development. From promoting education and healthcare to driving social welfare projects, women leaders at the local level often demonstrate stronger ties to community realities than their male counterparts.

3.0 WOMEN IN BUSINESS

Women have always been key drivers of economic activity in Africa. From traditional trade and agriculture to contemporary entrepreneurship, women's role in business has been indispensable. Figures like Nana

Asma'u of Sokoto, who combined scholarship with economic influence, and modern-day business icons such as Folorunsho Alakija (oil magnate) and Ibukun Awosika (former Chairperson of First Bank Nigeria), demonstrate the transformative role women play in business.

In Nigeria, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs)—the backbone of the economy—are largely dominated by women, especially in markets, agriculture, and creative industries. Despite systemic barriers such as limited access to loans, high-interest rates, and discriminatory lending practices, women entrepreneurs have continued to thrive.

Their businesses often reflect values of resilience, community- building, and reinvestment. Studies show that women tend to channel earnings into children's education, family welfare, and community development, thereby creating intergenerational benefits that promote long-term growth.

Domestically, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) MSME Development Fund and the Bank of Industry Gender Desk provide frameworks toenhance women's access to credit. Internationally, the ILO Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100, 1951) and Convention No. 111 (1958) guarantee women equal pay and non-discrimination at work. Similarly, the African Union's Agenda 2063 and SDG 5 stress women's economic empowerment as central to development.

4.0 WOMEN IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

The legal profession in Nigeria has witnessed the rise of women whose contributions continue to shape justice and advocacy. The appointment of Chief Folake Solanke, SAN, as the first female Senior Advocate of Nigeria marked a turning point in gender representation within the bar. Subsequent female trailblazers such as Funke Adekoya, SAN, have been recognized nationally and internationally for their expertise.

Women lawyers have been particularly influential in areas such as human rights law, family law, child rights advocacy, and gender justice. Their combination of empathy and legal acumen has made them effective defenders of the vulnerable.

At the grassroots, women in organizations like the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) provide free legal aid to indigent women and children, bridging the gap between marginalized communities and the justice system. This grassroots inclusion is essential because it ensures that poverty and illiteracy do not exclude women from accessing their rights under the law.

Domestically, the Legal Aid Act, 2 0 1 1 reinforces access to justice for indigent persons, while the VAPP Act, 2015 provides legal protection against gender-based violence. Internationally, CEDAW (Articles 2 and 15) and the Maputo Protocol (Article 8) obligate states to ensure women's equal access to justice.

5.0 WOMEN IN THE JUDICIARY

The judiciary is another sphere where women have made significant strides. A watershed moment came in 2012 when Justice Aloma Mariam Mukhtar became the first female Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN). While in the year 2024, Justice Kudirat Kekere-Ekun became the second and present female Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN). This shattered a longstanding glass ceiling and inspired many young women to pursue careers in law and justice.

Other female judicial leaders include Justice Zainab Bulkachuwa, the first female President of the Court of Appeal, Justice Monica Dongban-Mensem, the second and current president of the Court of Appeal, and several female Chief Judges across Nigerian states such as Lagos, Ekiti and Anambra. Their presence at the helm of judicial affairs underscores the competence and leadership potential of women in governance.

Importantly, at the grassroots level, women magistrates and presidents of customary courts play a crucial role in resolving family and community disputes. Their sensitivity to issues of domestic violence, child custody, and inheritance disputes often results in judgments that are more equitable and reflective of community needs. This judicial inclusion at the grassroots helps foster access to justice for ordinary citizens.

Domestically, the 1 9 9 9 Constitution (Section 3 6) guarantees fair hearing and access to justice, while judicial service commissions are encouraged to adopt gender-sensitive policies in appointments. Internationally, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Maputo Protocol (Articles 8 and 9) emphasize women's full participation in judicial institutions.

6.0 BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S INCLUSION

Despite the progress highlighted above, women continue to face numerous barriers that hinder full inclusion in politics, business, law, and the judiciary. Some of these include:

1. Patriarchal Norms and Stereotypes – Deeply rooted cultural beliefs continue to confine women to domestic roles.

2. Weak Enforcement of Gender Quotas – Even where laws exist, implementation remains poor, resulting in low political representation.

3. Financial Exclusion – Limited access to loans and campaign funding restricts women's competitiveness.

4. Work–Life Balance – The double burden of professional responsibilities and family care creates strain.

5. Marriage and Motherhood – Women are often compelled to prioritize marriage and childcare over career growth.

6. Harassment and Violence – Women face gender-based violence, intimidation, and harassment in politics and workplaces.

7. Slow Career Advancement – Structural discrimination results in fewer women being promoted into top positions.

These barriers persist despite the existence of legal guarantees such as Section 42 of the 1999 Constitution, the Electoral Act, 2022, and international obligations under CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Maputo Protocol. The challenge lies largely in implementation and enforcement.

7.0 ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF WOMEN'S INCLUSION BACKGROUND

The inclusion of women in governance and professional spaces has wide - ranging implications. While there are undeniable advantages, critics point to some challenges. A balanced discussion is therefore necessary.

ADVANTAGES

Better Representation – Women bring perspectives that lead to more comprehensive policies.

Economic Growth – Women reinvest earnings into families and communities.

Stronger Justice Systems – Female judges and lawyers often approach family and gender cases with fairness and empathy.

Peace and Conflict Resolution – Women have proven to be effective mediators in peace processes.

Role Models – The visibility of women in leadership inspires future generations.

DISADVANTAGES

Tokenism – In some cases, women are given positions only to fulfill quotas.

Work–Life Conflict – Balancing leadership roles with family responsibilities can be overwhelming.

Resistance in Patriarchal Societies – Inclusion sometimes fuels cultural resistance and backlash.

8.0 CONCLUSION

The inclusion of women in politics, business, law, and the judiciary is a non-negotiable requirement for Nigeria's progress. Women are not only capable leaders but also agents of peace, growth, and justice. From grassroots mobilizers to top judicial officers, their contributions are visible and impactful.

Yet, barriers such as patriarchy, financial exclusion, and weak implementation of laws persist. Reforms such as the Reserved Seats Bill and the deliberate expansion of grassroots judicial inclusion are crucial steps toward change.

Ultimately, achieving women's full inclusion is not merely a policy choice but both a constitutional guarantee and a legal responsibility under

international conventions and treaties. By aligning Nigeria's domestic laws—including the 1999 Constitution, Electoral Act 2022, VAPP Act 2015, and Legal Aid Act 2011—with its international commitments under CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Maputo Protocol, and the SDGs, Nigeria can accelerate progress toward genuine gender equality. A society that harnesses the full potential of its women is destined for equitable and sustainable development.

WOMEN WILL ALWAYS STAND OUT AND STAND TALL WHEN GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEAD.

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