

Nigeria: Buhari, Female Ministers and 35 Percent Affirmative Action

By Itunu Ajayi

Abuja — Amina Mohammed, Khadija Bukar Abba Ibrahim, Aisha Jummai Al-Hassan, Kemi Adeosun, Zainab Shamsuna Ahmed, Hajia Hadiza Abdullahi and Aisha Abubakar, all females, finally made it made to the cabinet of President Muhammadu Buhari as ministers. There was a glimpse of hope when the first ministerial list was released and with the believe that the President will increase the number in the second list, Nigeria women were optimistic that the 35 percent affirmative action they yearned for would be achieved.

Although some women took it upon themselves to begin an early and earnest campaign for more representation on the second list, their hope was dashed as the second list came and the total add up of women who made the entire list came up to just seven.

A women coalition group under the aegis of 100 Women lobby group expressed their dissatisfaction over the first list and told the whole world that they would use their voting power more judiciously in the next elections should the President fail to make up for the gap in the first list. But before they could say 'Jack Robinson' the second list was released and the much touted 35 percent affirmative action had further nose-dived.

They insisted that the President must respect and adhere strictly to the 35 percent affirmative action as enshrined in the National Gender Policy of 2006 adding that Nigeria must also respect its commitment to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals aimed at transforming the world by 2030 of which, goal 5 is specifically targeted at achieving gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. They said the president was present at the meeting held in New York and personally committed Nigeria to the goals which include universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination.

The North central coordinator of the group, Mrs. Anne Addeh insisted that the country is blessed with capable women in every facet of endeavour and well qualified to hold any elective position or appointment. She said if the president fails to satisfy the clamour for women to be well represented in his government, then Nigerian women will have no choice than to withdraw their support from his government noting that any party that does not respect women is not worth their support.

Addeh stated that Nigerian women had observed with keen interest the body language of President Buhari and noted with dismay that women are not even represented in all the trips he had made abroad since he assumed office.

Her words: "The president is on record during his campaign where he pledged 35 percent affirmative action for women in governance in line with the national gender policy while his

party APC's manifesto also promises equitable gender inclusiveness. Change that is being unveiled in Nigeria is incomplete if it is inequitable and non-inclusive. As we celebrate the international day of the girl child which theme is 'Take action for the adolescent girls in the post-2015 agenda', our advocacy for educating and empowering the girl child will be short-changed if she grows up into a Nigeria which does not give space to women to realize their full potential in governance".

The National Policy of Women that was adopted in 2000 reserved 30 percent for women under the affirmative action guidelines. In 2011, former President Goodluck Jonathan administration's cabinet had women occupying about 33 percent of the positions and there were calls for him to make it up to 35 percent as obtainable in some African countries.

For instance, the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments by percentage showed that out of 80 seats in Rwanda's lower house, 51 are occupied by women which represents 63.8 percent while the upper house has 10 seats for women out of 26, and this is put at 38.5 percent. In Senegal, 64 women make up 42.7 percent of the total 150 seats in the lower house; and South Africa's lower house has 166 women out of 396 seats and 19 out of 54 in the upper house. These figures represent 41.9 and 35.2 percents respectively. Namibia has 43 women in its lower house of 104 seats while 6 of the 26 seats in the upper house are occupied by them; this represents 41.3 and 23.1 percents respectively. In Ethiopia, 212 women are at par with their male counterparts in the lower house as their seat represent 38.3 percent of the total 546 seats while they sit majestically on 22 out of the 135 seats in the upper house, again this translates to 16.3 percent.

Also in Burundi, 44 out of the 121 seats in the lower house are occupied by women, this is 36.4 percent and they have 18 out of the 43 seats in the upper house which brings the percentage to 41.9. Even Zimbabwe with the sit-tight syndrome of its president has 85 seats for women out of the 270 in the lower house while the upper house is made up of 38 women of its 80 seats. The figure here is 31.5 and 47.5 percent respectively. Cameroon has 56 women out of 180 in its lower house while they have 20 out of 100 of the seats in the upper house, a representation of 31.1 and 20 percent. Kenya has 69 women of the 350 seats in the lower house and 18 out of 68 seats in the upper house. This is 19.7 and 26.5 percents.

A place like Pakistan where women are adjudged as a group of people to be seen and not heard, has 70 women out of the 340 in the lower house while in the upper house, they occupy 19 out of the 104 seats, a percentage of 20.6 and 18.3 in all. Nigeria has 14 seats for women in the lower house out of 360 and 8 out of 109 in the upper house; these figures are sparing, 5.6 and 6.5 percents respectively. Again Cape Verde has the highest number of women in ministerial positions on the continent, with nine out of 17 ministers which represented 53 percent, South Africa, has 15 out of 36 ministers are women or 41.7 percent, Rwanda, has 11 out of 31, or 35.5 percent, are women, and Burundi, where 8 out of 23, or 34.8 percent of the total are women.

Without prejudice, many of these countries if not all cannot be compared with Nigeria on any term. Africa and indeed the world see Nigeria as giant of Africa and big brother to all. Some of these countries have also enshrined in their constitution that a certain percentage of elective positions be exclusively reserved for women, so only women occupies such seat because they alone can contest for them.

Should Buhari stick to his guns on the number of female ministers, then Nigeria women will not have it as they did in the last administration where 13 women were on the cabinet at a particular period. Some have equally argued that the President's disposition to the office of the first lady though not in the Nigeria's constitution may also reduce his interest to work with women.

The president, Women in Politics Forum, Barrister Ebere Ifendu attributed the low representation of women in elective positions to the lack of internal party democracy where only men decides who picks tickets for positions. She said the non-provision for independent candidacy in the country's elections and the amount of fund that goes into campaigns and elections have continued to inhibit the chances of women taking the lead in elective positions. She said the advocacy will begin to go for independent candidacy and women groups will take it upon themselves to prop up women who are interested in politics and strengthen their parties. "All other African countries that have achieved 35 percent affirmative action or more with strong legislation to back them up, but it is different in Nigeria. We have very few women in the national assembly and this has made it difficult for us to achieve much in the changes we desire on issues concerning women. If we have the right number of women in the parliament and strong legislation on women issues, then we would not be where we are now.", she stated.