

‘Madam Due Process’: The Public Life of Obiageli Ezekwesili

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Abstract

The Nigerian political sphere dominated by males has often viewed the emergence of amazons like Obiageli Ezekwesili as a break from the norm. The more women are marginalized, the louder and more aggressive female spokespersons become. The post-colonial period in Nigeria has witnessed the rise of many of such women on the political scene. This paper attempts to analyse the public life of Obiageli Ezekwesili with a bid to provide insights into the lifestyle of the exemplary woman and analyse the major forces that spurred her interest in politics. Existing literature on Nigerian women in politics tend to focus on women during the colonial period. However, this paper takes a different approach by identifying and analysing the work life of a contemporary woman. The paper provides a biography rich enough to inspire Nigerian women to aspire for political positions and become change agents. It presents an overview of the early life, educational background, and career of the subject, highlighting the key forces that shaped and ensured her active participation in Nigerian politics. It also identifies, evaluates and reviews, through the lens of Ezekwesili’s life, the achievements and obstacles women face in the political sphere in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. The study employs the use of official reports, documentaries, journal and newspaper articles and books.

Keywords: *Nigerian women, gender equality, government, “Bring Back Our Girls”, transparency*

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Introduction

It is time for women to become truly global.¹

Gender disparity occurs in various forms in virtually all sectors of the society prevalently in Africa, including the political sector. The persistence of gender injustice and inequality in post-colonial politics and social institutions stimulates critical reflection among the growing pool of educated women in Africa.² Obiageli Ezekwesili³ has experienced, first-hand, the bias women face in making political strides in Nigeria and is recognised for making giant strides in a male dominated sphere as well as paving the way for the younger generation of female leaders as 'movers' and 'shakers' of the political sphere in Nigeria. The fact that she could not be intimidated, is evident in her efforts at tackling prominent individuals in various political positions in her journeys to achieve the goal of better governance and a corrupt-free Nigeria without backing down from challenges that may ensue.

Equally focused on shifting Nigerian politics towards issues rather than personalities and elite bargaining, she has been at the forefront of raising awareness on various issues such as gender-based disparity, poor education, insecurity, poverty and corrupt leadership, etc.. In a patriarchal society such as Nigeria, Oby Ezekwesili has recorded a number of firsts in terms of political activities and career advancement as an individual and through collective efforts. She has become a voice for the girl child, a problem solver, a pioneer of initiatives, a political advocate, a trailblazer, a pressure group leader, a check on public office holders at different times to ensure performance accountability that is tied to result adequacy.⁴

Her Early Life

Obiageli Katryn Ezekwesili popularly known as Oby Ezekwisili was born on the 28th of April, 1963, as the first of six children born to Benjamin Ujubuonu and Cecilia Nwayiaka Ujubuonu both from Anambra State, Nigeria. Coming from a family that experienced the Nigerian Civil War and its devastating effects, she was nurtured and groomed to understand public affairs especially political issues. Her father - Benjamin Ujubuonu - gave no room to chance by creating a consciousness of social and political development as well as integrity

in her.⁵ Thus, their discussions even at her early age revolved around these. He raised Oby and her siblings from his income as a civil servant working with the Nigerian Port Authority.

A first-hand experience that shaped the lives of this young family was the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970. Prior to the time, the Ujubonu family had settled in Lagos. However, with the crisis and ethnic unrest in different parts of the country, most individuals from the Eastern region had to move swiftly back to the East. Expected consequences of the war such as loss of lives and properties were felt by the family as they received hard blows of losing their relatives and possessions. The family subsequently returned to Lagos after the war.

Thus, it can be established that experiencing the civil war as a young child coupled with the values of political consciousness ingrained in her laid the solid foundation that inspired young Oby to drive for good governance.⁶

Education

The role of education is paramount and indispensable. Obiageli attended African Primary School, Ajegunle Lagos. After the completion of her primary education, she enrolled at United Christian College, Apapa, Lagos for her secondary education. She bagged a Bachelor's degree from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and holds a Master's degree in International Law and Diplomacy from the University of Lagos. Between 1989-1992, she completed her professional certification in Accountancy from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria. She also holds another Master's degree in Public Policy and Administration from the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (1997-2000).⁷

Over the years, she received about two honorary Doctorate degrees from the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta in 2012 and more recent in 2016 from University of Essex. Prior to her involvement in politics in Nigeria, Ezekwesili worked with Professor Jeffrey Sachs at the Centre for International Development at Harvard University. In the course of her educational development, she married Pastor Chinedu Ezekwesili of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a union that produced three sons. At any opportunity given to talk about her husband, Dr. (Mrs.) Ezekwesili always emphasizes the bond with her spouse. She often describes him as a

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man filled with wisdom and experiences from which she draws strength.

Career

*I see career as an assignment. My belief is that my life is a continuum, and being a continuum means that I am not here to do a job so that I can earn income.*⁸

Often times, our idea of the ultimate career is formed by our experiences and people around us. On the one hand, her father-Benjamin Ujubonu desired to have her as a chartered accountant; on the other however, her passion for the public sphere eventually took over. It can be summed up that her education as an accountant gave her the platform that eventually launched her into politics. After the completion of her second degree, she started her professional career by joining Deloitte & Touche, while learning the practical aspect of becoming a chartered accountant. In that capacity, she worked as an auditor and financial services consultant.

Following the completion of her degree at Harvard University in 2000, she worked as Director of the Harvard-Nigeria Economic Strategy Programme under the tutelage of Professor Jeffrey Sachs at the Centre for International Development.⁹ The programme was geared towards facilitating technical engagement of Harvard University with the newly elected government of President Olusegun Obasanjo. This was primarily aimed at debt sustainability analysis for advocacy with the White House for debt cancellation and reduction which in turn led to the establishment of Nigeria's Debt Management Office.¹⁰ This position prepared her for advancement in her career which became intertwined with politics as she received her first appointment as an aide to former President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2002. She was subsequently (in October 2003) designated Senior Special Adviser on Budget Monitoring and Price Intelligent Unit (BMPIU) also known as Due Process Unit. Her major goal in this capacity built her portfolio for further political involvement and furtherance of her career.

Originally established in 2001, the vision of BMPIU was to "help move Nigeria to a level where public procurement is governed

by the principles of integrity, transparency, competence and competitiveness as national ethos".¹¹ Under the leadership of Ezekwesili, the process of contract invitation, contract award and project implementation was handled with integrity which earned her the sobriquet - "Madam Due Process".¹² Sequentially, the Federal Inspectorate Service was restructured as an improved quality assurance mechanism and transparency and accountability mechanisms were introduced for better governance of the budget.¹³ Malam Nasir el-Rufai quoted someone to have said, "It is only a mad man who would make the mistake of saying anything related to bribery to Madam Due Process. It is not even something you would think of".¹⁴

Under the same presidency, she was appointed as Cabinet Minister of Solid Minerals (Mines and Steel) from July 2005 to June 2006. Despite the fact that her tenure lasted a year, she successfully attracted international patronage making Nigeria a global destination for credible mining investments. This involved overseeing the passage of the Minerals and Mining Act, the establishment of the Nigerian Mining Cadastre Office, and the deliberate opening of the sector to private participation.¹⁵

Similarly, she served as Minister of Education between June 2006 and April 2007. Salihu Mohammed ascribed the reform conceived during the period as "the most radical of the restructuring and reforms prescription reports".¹⁶ The packages of reforms included development of entrepreneurship alongside schooling, ensuring all communities are reached with one programme or the other, partnership with stake holders and private sector to revamp school structures (for example, the Nigerian Stock Exchange launched the 'Adopt-a-Public School Initiative' in 2007).¹⁷ These helped in attaining the Millennium Development Goals (now Sustainable Development Goals). Adamawa, Yobe and Borno served as pilot states to promote the girl child education since they were identified as being the weakest in terms of girl-child education in the country.

In 2007, she was appointed Vice President of the World Bank (Africa Region) by the then President of the World Bank - Paul Wolfowitz. In that capacity, she was in charge of economic and sectoral works in about 47 Sub-Saharan African countries. She worked hand in hand with more than 1500 staff in different

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capacities.¹⁸ It is of equal importance to mention that her contributions were not just leaning towards economic development of Africa but also towards health. According to WHO, “malaria burden was still expanding as the biggest obstacle to development in a large number of countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa” during the period.¹⁹ During her tenure, there were investments in malaria control essentially geared towards implementation of policies that would have returns both in terms of lives saved and well beyond the health sector. Those investments were based on the evidence that malaria control contributes to health and development in Africa. Ezekwesili’s ideology expressed the World Bank’s commitment to strengthening bodies and institutes as it deploys innovative approaches to end deaths from malaria.²⁰

Understanding the plight of African women and the role women play in economic development, Ezekwesili sought for the empowerment of women. Studies have shown that investment in women’s human capital has become important for growth in industrialized economies.²¹ The identification of gender inequality in education and access to formal sector employment as a significant constraint in Sub-Saharan Africa was evident as a highlight of her tenure through advocacy. This was aptly captured during her opening remarks at the World Bank conference in Japan:

[In Africa] we see women carrying products from the farm on their head. Now imagine the acceleration of productivity if they did not have to carry these heavy loads on their heads, if they had the necessary infrastructure with which to make agriculture truly work for African society. Every time we see women incapacitated by the unavailability of infrastructure, they are foregoing very important activities that they should otherwise be applying themselves to, like going to school or engaging in income-earning activities that would improve their lives and those of their families.²²

As a champion for private sector dominance, Ezekwesili partnered with African countries to pursue ease of doing business and

competitiveness reforms that helped improve their business environments. Countries like Rwanda, Mauritius, Cape Verde, Seychelles, Senegal, Liberia and Botswana responded positively with ambitious programmes of reforms and featured at one time or another on the Annual Top Ten Most Reforming Countries List.²³

Ezekwesili prioritized World Bank support to Africa's Technology sector with particular focus on ICT. She spearheaded and championed revolutionary reforms in Technology with waves of Telecom and ICT liberalization, deregulation and divestment programmes in over thirty countries. This helped raised the efficiency of telecom services across the continent, reduced leakages of public resources previously spent on failing state telecom monopolies, increased the contribution of ICT and technology more broadly to growth. African economies of SSA benefited considerably from the growth of the mobile sector following what Ezekwesili designed and pursued vigorously as "The Transformative Power of ICT in Africa".²⁴

She raised the priority and profile of World Bank portfolio in education and health in order to grow Africa's human development and higher stock of Human Capital. While ensuring the expansion of universal access to Basic Education, in her time, World Bank lending to governments for the establishment of tertiary institutions across the continent increased. She led the World Bank team to focus on supporting the emergence of Centres or Academic Excellence in different parts of the continent. Her complementary focus on building massive and relevant skills to address the unemployability supply-side issues in education earned her applause across the Bank's partner countries.

Until the end of her widely celebrated and successful five-year leadership in 2012 at the World Bank, she promoted Africa's economic interests. For instance, she ensured an increase in the overall lending in Africa to \$40 billion. Worth of note is her engagement with African and world leadership and regional institutions such as the United Nations, African Union and ECOWAS, which was effective in building a strong economic legacy.²⁵ This in turn gave birth to an extensive economic growth which allowed the World Bank to cater for the financial interest of Africans.

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From 2012 till date, she has made conscious efforts to build her career which in the most recent time is focused on the political limelight. Special attention will be given to her political exploits much later in this paper. Of utmost importance is the fact that she built her career from the scratch while preparing for public service.²⁶

The “Bring Back Our Girls” Movement

For us as a movement, our primary issue is that we share humanity. It is on this basis that there is a social contract between the citizens and the government²⁷

Third World women activists have been made invisible through a male-dominated discipline of political theory. Meanwhile, their doggedness and resilience in ensuring attainment of their advocacy goals recognises them as universal human values which ought to have a central place in any progressive movement for social change.²⁸ The phrase “Bring Back Our Girls” became a worldwide hash tag due to Oby Ezekwesili’s non-relentless tweeting on a social media platform (Twitter) attracting the attention of world leaders and influencers. This was as a result of the kidnapping of 276 secondary school girls (between ages 15 and 18) from their school in Chibok located in Borno State, Nigeria, by an Islamist extremist terrorist organisation known as Boko Haram²⁹ on April 14, 2014. Boko Haram had gained popularity for their widespread insurgent activities and killing spree; however, the incident was its first record of mass kidnap of students or minors.³⁰

After six weeks, the number of girls kidnapped and perpetrators was verified by a Presidential Committee on Missing Chibok girls led by Retired Brigadier General Ibrahim Sabo. The emergence of the Bring Back Our Girls Movement was precipitated by a result of series of events in which Oby Ezekwesili played a pivotal role. After receiving the news through a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) tweet, Oby Ezekwesili on the 23rd of April, at a live-streaming of a UNESCO event urged the audience to stand and chant “Bring Back Our Daughters” in solidarity of the missing Chibok girls. Simultaneously, an avid follower of Ezekwesili tweeted

‘Bring back our daughters, bring back our girls’ as a way of showing support and birthed the formal adoption of ‘Bring Back Our Girls’ as a global hash tag.³¹ Recognizing her political strength and popularity, she aided the focus of the lens on this predicament by founding, in collaboration with three other women, a citizen movement known as the Bring Back Our Girls Movement and opened the “BBOG_Nigeria” twitter account to underscore the activities of the movement. She sped into action due to continuous attacks on school children in North Eastern Nigeria such as the indiscriminate attack on school boys who were mutilated and burnt at the Federal Government College, Buni Yadi in Yobe State on February 24, 2014 and decided it was time to voice out and ensure such an act was put to an abrupt end.

While holding the incumbent government responsible for the polarized outcome along political, ethnic and religious lines as a result of subservient handling of the crisis, she reprimanded the opposition who were more concerned with seizing the opportunity as political leverage. The first solidarity march with the chant ‘Bring Back Our Girls now and alive’ took place on the 30th of April, 2014 to signal a uniform sense of purpose void of political affiliation or rancor. The acronym ‘HUMANITEED’ which connotes Hope, Unity, Motivation, Affability, Nationalism Integrity, Equity, Empathy and Discipline signalled the core values of the movement that has Oby Ezekwesili as its default leader.³² She has been described as a ‘superhero’ by the hapless families of the victims and noted that the extent of bureaucracy and red tapism in the Nigerian political system serves as an ostensible hindrance. The Chibok girls’ saga served as a poster-child for numerous Nigerians who had been maligned by the incessant terrorist attacks in Northern Nigeria and should not be forgotten while governmental administration continues to revolve. Customarily, her decision to portray the Bring Back Our Girls movement as a citizens’ movement rather than a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) meant that financial donations could not be solicited, rather members of the movement had to pump in personal funds to cover incurred expenses.

This agitation did not phase out numerous personal threats, maligned and gendered political discord by individuals and government agencies without leaving out trolling hate speech and target misalignment of her speeches and messages. This was

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exemplified in an attempt by security operatives to prevent her from boarding a flight to London for a scheduled BBC interview. Also, she was arrested alongside some members of the movement during a protest at the Unity Fountain, Abuja, on January 23, 2018 with records of tear gas attacks, push backs, and arrests against the movement.³³ A south-eastern Nigeria woman championing the empathy-based movement showed non conformity to ethnic bias or segregation but rather uniformity of purpose. She has often been criticized by fellow south-easterners who posit the need for her involvement in disparities within her ethnic group rather than those of the Northern Nigeria.

However, through the movement, the BBOG movement embarked on numerous campaigns, protests, sit outs, press releases advocating for the release of the missing Chibok girls as well as attracting similar setups within and outside Nigeria. Notable among these were the constant sleepovers in front of the Nigerian Embassy in the United States.³⁴ In April 2014, the BBC reported that the #BringBackOurGirls trended on Twitter with over 3.3 million tweets, 27 percent of the tweets came from Nigeria, 26 percent from the United States and 11 percent from the United Kingdom.³⁵ This set the tone for the clamour for effective security to ensure adequate protection of lives and properties. As a result, it spilled over to her campaign promise during the presidential campaign as well as admonishing oppositions and political administrations to regulate the various security agencies to ensure effective and efficient discharge of duties.

The protests had amassed national activists and campaign groups seeking resolution of this unfortunate development. On June 2, 2014, despite the peaceful tone of the protests, such protests were banned in Abuja some weeks after the establishment of the blistering movement. Ezekwesili considered this an illegal move and challenged the government in court particularly due to the violence-free posture of the protest. Consequently, she secured a judgement against the government on June 4, 2014.³⁶ These actions resulted in massive backlash particularly from oppositions and distrusting Nigerians who perceived her actions as a calculated political move and partisan political tool to attain or attract political appointment. Such claims have continued to be vehemently refuted.

On the 6th of May 2016, 82 Chibok girls gained freedom after lengthy negotiations with the Islamist sect. This gave Ezekwesili a sense of affirmation and indescribable joy in seeing these girls and their families having a happy ending to a sour tale. More than 50 girls have been recorded to have escaped as well as the release of 21 other girls in October 2016 due to negotiations carried out by international governments and groups such as the government of Switzerland and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Her response to the government was a tell-tale of commendation and retribution as a result of the delay experienced in gaining a positive outcome. Currently, due to lack of swift movements and ineffective security measures 112 of the 276 school girls are still declared missing with 13 presumed dead.³⁷

In February 2019, a mass kidnapping of 110 girls (11-19 years) was reported in Dapchi, North-eastern Yobe State. Ezekwesili termed this a consequence of nonchalant attitude and lack of efficient tact by the government while stressing that such mishaps are bound to reoccur if not nibbed in the bud.

She has continued to organise lectures, live broadcasts and discussions and seminars to maintain awareness and consciousness on the Bring Back our girls' issue. Invariably, the annual Chibok Girls Lecture has been institutionalised to keep the issue on the front burner of (inter)national discourse. On April 14, 2020, to mark the 6th year anniversary of the mass kidnapping of the Chibok girls, she held an online live session in which she delivered a lecture titled "Empathy Deficit: The Missing Link in The Making of a Nigerian Nation" in which she outlined the causes, instances and effects of empathy gap on governmental and individual levels whilst using the Chibok girls as a case study.³⁸ The movement's chant "When shall we stop? Not until our girls are back and alive" serves as a premise that the movement would not fizzle out any time soon until its mandate is duly upheld.

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Political Exploits

*I will disrupt the politics of failure*³⁹

The relatively small number of women in positions of power and leadership has often been marginalised in the discharge of their duties and political activities.⁴⁰ Obiageli Ezekwesili's quest into political space took shape from an early beginning of activism in the 1990s when Nigeria was still under military rule. She became the first and only woman to lead a group of professionals – The Concerned Professionals who campaigned against the continuation of military rule and demanded for the restoration of MKO Abiola's mandate in 1993, championing the cause of democracy.⁴¹

Described as one of Nigerian status quo's fiercest critics, Obiageli Ezekwesili has been fundamental in calling to order various government administrations thereby serving as a check on various governmental procedures. These include enumeration of the extent of embezzlement such as sudden disappearance of funds termed 'oil money' during the Olusegun Obasanjo administration (1998-2007). The Umaru Yar'Adua administration (2007-2010) was faulted for its lackadaisical attitude towards the plight of Nigerians and insurgency threat. On May 29, 2014, at a symposium on 'Citizens, Accountability and Democracy', the Goodluck Jonathan's administration (2010-2015) that followed was not spared as she pointed out the slow pace and attention put into recovering the missing Chibok girls. For Muhammadu Buhari's administration (2015 till date), following the killing of over 100 people by Fulani herdsmen, she embarked on a lone protest to Aso Rock, Abuja in June 2018. Despite being stopped by security personnel, she successfully delivered her 18-point demand in which she urged the administration to tackle security decadence in the country.⁴²

In October 2018, on the platform of the Allied Congress Party of Nigeria (ACPN), using the #Hope2019 as a campaign slogan, she declared her intention to contest as the only female candidate for the highest political office in Nigeria, that is, the presidential seat in the 2019 national elections. Her intense desire to ensure due process in all political strata in Nigeria is often demonstrated in her conversations which describe her distaste for what she has labelled 'bad governance'. In her rise in the public

sector, she has made it known to all who cares to listen that she is not a politician but rather a technocrat who understands the political context of Nigeria. “I am a candidate of the people, not a candidate of the political class. I am not running to make a statement. I am running to win”.⁴³

During her campaigns and presidential debates, terming her campaign as a ‘rescue mission’, she accentuated her mandate of tackling poverty and rejuvenating the education and service sectors. This meant lifting 80 million Nigerians out of poverty if elected as president. If achieved, it will improve standard of living as well as eliminate the country from the shameful list of countries experiencing extreme poverty. Most emphatically, the education of the girl-child seen as ‘smart-economics’ from which the entire society is bound to benefit and added that in an attempt to rejuvenate the economy, fuel subsidy will be scrapped. Also, she describes tackling corruption as her primary aim of seeking the presidential seat. In November 2018, she stepped down as the leader of the Red Card Movement (RCM), an apolitical movement established in January 2018 which has as its primary objective the need to put an end to the cynical problem of poor leadership and bad governance in Nigeria with “My PVC, My Red Card’ forming part of its logo. This was to avoid conflict of interest seeing that she was actively contesting in the presidential race. However, things took a different turn on January 24, 2019, few weeks to the scheduled elections when she officially stepped down as a presidential candidate. Many Nigerians cited foul play such as cases of bullying or blackmail by the opposition while others were of the opinion that she was not a worthy opponent to take on the two principal candidates - President Muhammadu Buhari (Action Congress of Nigeria) and former Vice President Atiku Abubakar (People’s Democratic Party) representing the two parties known for rationing control of the presidential seats. Another impediment could perhaps be attributed to skirmishes between her and the leadership of her political party platform (ACPN) when she confirmed by stating that “I had mistakenly assumed that the ACPN was aligned with me to offer, until it proved otherwise”. This translated to a colossal range of accusations between Ezekwesili and Alhaji Abdul-Ganiyu Galadima, the National Chairman of ACPN. On one side, she was accused of lackadaisical attitude towards efforts geared at attaining the presidential seat as

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well as hoarding of campaign donations to which Oby responded by stating that the party was engaging in political transactions that negated all she stood for and intended to convey as the country's first citizen. However, in the spirit of transparency, she promised to convene a World Press Conference to publish a full report of her three-month presidential campaign which she did eventually. The swift endorsement of President Muhammadu Buhari by the party (ACPN) barely hours after Ezekwesili stepped down raised eyebrows amongst Nigerian citizens who had paid close attention to the unfolding drama of the election season.

Despite the above development, Obiageli Ezekwesili resorted to take steps aimed at improving her chances of attaining the presidential seat even if it meant stepping aside while gearing up for the 2023 elections to ensure a more favourable outcome. Currently, she is channelling her energy to ensure a change in the political leadership of the country through the formation of coalition called National Consultative Front (NCF) alongside Kingsley Moghalu, Donald Duke and other capable intellectuals with impressive portfolios towards providing a favourable and more effective alternative to the two existing giant political parties. The NCF, also known as the 'July 1st Movement' has been described as a new Pan Nigerian coalition of intellectuals and professionals who are determined to chart a new political course for the country. In the press conference they called on "those presently in charge of Federal Government, military and security apparatus to immediately wake up and do everything to stop the ongoing senseless pogrom against the masses" as a means to leading its voice to the security lapses experienced in Nigeria.⁴ Their agenda is to achieve laid-out aims and objectives through inclusion of change agents such as women, youths and artisans who share the same drive to engender a New Nigeria that is all-inclusive. Within this movement, Oby Ezekwesili has been placed in charge of anchoring Fix Politics Initiative, a platform of NCF. This has been considered a worthy political alternative for the masses that willfully make the grievances against the ruling party (APC) known, have scars and neither forgotten the record of unequivocal leadership displayed by the previous ruling party (PDP). This is a follow-up to her dream for Nigeria which is a Nigeria that works for all. In her own words, "this coalition for a viable

alternative has now more than ever before become an urgent mission for and on behalf of the citizenry”⁴⁵

Using the power of social media, Ezekwesili has used the keypad as a tool for agitating numerous political and social issues in a blizzard of tweets on the 280-character social medium, Twitter. Notable among them is the indefinite suspension of African Independent Television (AIT) and Ray power both subsidiaries of DAAR Communications on June 7, 2019 over a critique of President Muhammadu Buhari which she called a trample on of press freedom and an impediment to democracy. She also used this social media platform to stand up against slut-shaming her and other women alike in an attempt to navigate a deeply patriarchal society.

Moving forward, there is utmost concentration on the concept of ‘office of the citizen’. She describes citizens’ wellbeing as the spectrum of political leadership and the highest office of the land to ensure the needs of the citizens is seen as paramount. Her quest to contest for the highest political position in Nigeria has vividly given Nigerian women the voice to be divergent and ask for more. Although women have continued to face numerous challenges in this bid, the aspiration of one woman (in this case Dr. Ezekwesili) will continue to strengthen women to speak against a system that excludes them from national building.

Achievements

What I intend to do is to disrupt this and build a nation that is based on prosperity, stability, cohesion, and equality of opportunities for our people⁴⁶

Dr. Ezekwesili’s political and career portfolio offers enough proof of her tremendous growth as a woman and impact on lives and the society (locally and internationally). This shows that women can and do negotiate a variety of more or less effective solutions to carve out a space for themselves in the political domain.⁴⁷ In her capacity as a voice for the people, she has successfully served as a thorn in the flesh of various administrations in a bid to hold them accountable for their actions especially as regards corruption. Invariably, admonishing citizens’ groups, the media and parliaments to follow

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suit. She opines that corruption is the major hindrance to Nigeria's growth and can be tackled simply by preventing opportunities for corruption.⁴⁸ According to her, "Nigeria has lost more than \$400 billion to large-scale corruption since independence in 1960."⁴⁹ Shedding light on her achievements without mentioning her quest for anti-corruption would be somewhat impossible. Her stance against corruption has always been visible. As a member of President Obasanjo's economic team, Ezekwesili was responsible for developing the government's overall comprehensive anti-corruption, transparency and good governance strategy. She negotiated the partnership between Nigeria and the G8.⁵⁰ This was known as the "Compact to Promote Transparency and Combat Corruption" which was signed by President George Bush and President Obasanjo at the 30th G8 summit held in the United States in June, 2004. This was regarded by the United States as part of Nigeria's progressive actions that made it merit debt cancellation.

Similarly, her meticulous work in the public sector earned her the name "Madam Due Process" in her strive towards attaining accountability. This appellation is a constant reminder of, perhaps, one of her most remarkable achievements. Ensuring an overhaul of the *modus operandi* for public procurement system through the Due Process Initiative helped in correcting the decadence of extreme embezzlement by public office holders hitherto prevalent. Some of the achievements of BMPIU under Ezekwesili were: the promotion of fair play and competition resulting in huge savings through reduction in contracts sum to the tune of NGN 77.50 billion or USD 500 million.⁵¹ Furthermore, unlike in the past when contracts were awarded at more than 200 percent of the true cost and to influential people in society, BMPIU recognized only competent contractors who went through the due process. As a result of the transparency involved in the due process, BMPIU was able to save additional NGN 125 billion or USD 806.45 million for the nation in two and a half years. Dr Ezekwesili's brilliant performance in Nigeria's public sector management eventually made it possible for her to be appointed the Vice-President for the World Bank's African Region in 2007.⁵²

As continuous agitation for transparency cuts across her leadership in the mining sector, her position as the Minister and Chairperson of the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency

Initiative (NEITI), she spearheaded the first ever audit of the nation's oil and gas sector and invariably orchestrated the NEITI legislation and the new Minerals and Mining legislation. She successfully exposed numerous financial misappropriation scandals that generated a lot of fanfare in the press. This helped to keep those in the political office on their toes for fear of being ousted by 'Madam Due Process'.

A major achievement under her leadership as Minister of Education was that the increasing statistics of 'Out-Of-School-Children' (OOSC) dropped. As Minister of education for 10 months, June 2006 – April 2007 Ezekwesili designed and began implementing comprehensive reforms that cut across all levels and spheres in the sector. The menace of Out-Of-School-Children was already evident in the over seven million children affected. Ezekwesili effectively deployed the Federal Government intervention fund to incentivize states to increase enrolment, transition, and completion of OOSC. The initiative also focused on bridging the disparity between the disproportionate population of girls in school compared to boys especially in Northern Nigeria. The intense focus by the Minister and use of effective incentives and policy measures that included adopting global best practices from other countries helped ensure that for the next academic enrolment period, more students were actively attending and participating in schools.⁵³ Also emphasising the non-compromising feature of quality teaching capacity, she ensured the boosting of the minimum qualification required to teach at primary and secondary levels. This led her to propose a "House All Teachers" scheme meant to serve as incentives for teachers to be adopted by all tiers of government.

In terms of advocacy, the establishment of a formidable social movement (the Bring Back Our Girls Movement) safeguarded a high degree of awareness and consciousness geared towards the epileptic security in Nigeria that have affected the citizens particularly children in many ways. It is aghast to see that the extent of insecurity has led to kidnapping, rape, mutilation, death amongst other atrocious crimes against children in Nigeria. In the last six years, it is note-worthy that this movement has resulted in the return of some of the abducted girls by the Boko Haram terrorist group due to constant help given to families in seeking justice. This in turn generated international outcry and constant presence and reminder of

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various administrations in a bid to successfully reunite the victims with their families.

With a record of low representation of women in active politicking, Ezekwesili has dived into unfamiliar waters. Despite stepping down as a presidential candidate, she has served as a beacon of hope to other Nigerian women who aspire for political positions. There is nationwide clamour for more and better representation of women in the political space in general. She is known as one of the most accessible and socially engaging public figures in Nigeria. Her strong media presence particularly on Twitter platform actively serves as a voice for conveying messages and attracting attention (nationally and internationally) to the parasitic activities of government as well as championing the social contract between the governed and the government. The hashtag #BringBackOurGirls clearly shows she wields of social media power in creating awareness and igniting global outrage.⁵⁴ Commentaries, interactions and debates between her and her followers is a record of her impact on Nigerian youths who have directly or indirectly benefitted from her problem-solving tactics.

She has received numerous accolades, awards and recognition for her activities in various sectors. In 2006, she was awarded the National award of Commander of the Order of the Federal Republic (CFR). As well as an Achievement Award from the Whitaker Group for her laudable work during her tenure at the World Bank in March 28, 2012.⁵⁵ Others include BBC's 100 Women in 2014; in 2015, she was one of the World's 100 Most Influential People by Time Magazine, Time 100 Most Influential People 2015, Albert Einstein's Foundation's Genius: 100 visions of the future in 2018, Vanguard Award for 2019 by Howard University Washington DC. In 2018, she joined the league of Nobel Peace Prize as a worthy nominee. In the course of the nomination, the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) described her as 'an international champion in the fight against corruption'.⁵⁶ It is no small feat being nominated in recognition for her influence and work on transparency.

In March 26 2019, Ezekwesili emerged Forbes Woman African Social Influencer at the prestigious Forbes Woman Africa Awards in Durban, South Africa in recognition of her blizzard tweets regarding copious societal issues ranging from gender, economic, social to political issues especially the viral #BringBackOurGirls

Campaign⁵⁷ and also selected as a 2020 Global Leadership Awards Nominee. Recently, in March 2020, she made it to the list of Africa's 50 Most Powerful Women, a list that included nine other Nigerian women changing stereotypes across diverse sectors.

In the same vein, she has served on numerous boards such as Bharti Airtel, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the School of Public Policy of Central European University, The Harold Hartog School of Government and Policy, Non-African Magazine, and the Centre for Global Leadership at Tufts University⁵⁸ while concurrently developing a graduate school of public policy in Abuja, Nigeria.

An elder technocrat, who has amassed public goodwill, Oby Ezekwesili has proven that consistency is indeed the hallmark of integrity. As a formidable trailblazer, she remains unapologetic about her bold vision for Nigeria as she believes in putting in the work to attain desired results.

Conclusion

Character, competence, and capacity are some of the words used in describing Oby Ezekwesili as a woman, public figure, career enthusiast, and political actor. For instance, in 2015, she was listed by Time Magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world particularly for the willpower and impactful character she portrays. Her 57 years life has shaken the political scene locally and internationally which gives the assurance that more ground breaking initiatives will be undertaken in the distant future by this woman who has no 'pause button' but keeps moving to attain a better Nigeria for all and sundry. She affirmed the view that there is no excuse for lapses in responsibilities and duties expected of leaders and efficient delivery to the average Nigerian. As a result, she strived for accountability in every sector of Nigeria, be it political, economic, social, educational or otherwise.

Despite the achievements of Nigerian women in politics, women are largely faced with certain challenges. Finance is a cardinal and indispensable necessity in Nigerian political system. Many female political aspirants lack financial support of capable individuals, groups and organisations due to the 'assumed' better chances of their male counterparts. Despite the increasing rate of globalization, patriarchy is still embedded in Nigerian politics.

'Madam Due Process'

Simply put, a large percentage of Nigerians believe that women have no place in politics.

There is an ingrained marginalization of women in the structure of Nigerian political parties. Women are often relegated to the female wings of the political parties, mostly visible in grassroots mobilization during electoral seasons. This is a sharp contrast to the fact that Nigeria has some of the most educated and accomplished women on the African continent. As at 2017, there were about 7.3% women in the National Assembly: women occupied only 8 of the 109 seats in the Senate and 21 of the 309 seats in the House of Representatives.⁵⁹

An overview of Oby Ezekwesili's political and career span shows that she is an intellectual with pragmatic understanding of the yearnings of Nigerians through deliberate identification of the problem, acquisition of necessary problem-solving tools, and swift movement to tackle such problem whether or not she steps on toes in the process. Her pedigree and admirable track record with a catalytic effect of top-notch national and international following has continued to pave the way for more opportunities to serve the people, and in her own way improve the general well-being of Nigerians whom she described as 'the country's most valuable asset'.⁶⁰ In all, she defies the stereotypical limits of an average Nigerian woman, giving inspiration to future leaders.

Notes

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