Power and peril: Unveiling the history of harassment scandals against top Nigerian politicians, By Osaruonamen Ibizugbe

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From these stories, it becomes evident that the repercussions of the actions of the mentioned politicians extend beyond individual victims, affecting public trust in political institutions and the very fabric of democracy. By shedding light on these scandals, we aim to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by victims of harassment and the urgent need for reform in political and social systems in Nigeria.  
  
In recent years, the issue of harassment has emerged as a significant concern within the political landscape of Nigeria. High-profile politicians, who are often seen as role models and leaders, have faced allegations that highlight a troubling pattern of behaviour that undermines the principles of respect and integrity.  
  
Harassment, whether physical, sexual, or emotional, is not merely a personal failing, it reflects systemic issues within political structures that often prioritise power over accountability. The cases of politicians like Godswill Akpabio, Elisha Abbo, and Dino Melaye are emblematic of a broader culture in which misconduct can go unchecked, leading to a cycle of silence and impunity. As these figures navigate their political careers, the repercussions of their actions extend beyond individual victims, affecting public trust in political institutions and the very fabric of democracy.  
  
This piece will delve into the stories of a number of prominent Nigerian politicians accused of harassment, examining the implications of their actions on societal norms, gender dynamics, and the political climate. By shedding light on these scandals, we aim to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by victims of harassment and the urgent need for reform in Nigeria’s political and social systems.  
  
The Nigerian Senate, an institution tasked with enacting laws and upholding ethical standards, has frequently found itself mired in these controversies that highlight systemic issues of power, gender inequality, and accountability. Several cases spanning allegations of sexual harassment, physical/verbal assault, and domestic violence offer a sobering lens into how these challenges manifest at the highest levels of government.  
  
Among the notable figures fingered in controversies in Nigeria is Godswill Akpabio, a two-time former governor of Akwa Ibom State, former minister of Niger Delta Affairs and currently the president of the Senate. During his tenure as minister of Niger Delta Affairs, allegations of sexual harassment were made against him by Dr Joi Nunieh, the former acting managing director of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). The accusation is contained in a sexual harassment petition she filed against Akpabio, which has kept her in the media spotlight for weeks.  
  
The most recent controversy involves Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan, who, on 28 February publicly accused Mr Akpabio of making inappropriate advances at her, including during a visit to his residence in Akwa Ibom State on 8 December, 2023. Her petition, first submitted on 5 March, was dismissed on a technicality under Senate order 40 (4), which prohibits senators from submitting petitions they have signed themselves. Undeterred, she resubmitted her complaint on 6 March, just moments before facing a contentious suspension from the Senate. The dismissal and subsequent suspension of Mrs Akpoti-Uduaghan underscore the barriers women face in seeking justice within institutions that often prioritise protecting their own over addressing misconduct.  
  
Such tactics of intimidation are not new to the Senate. In 2016, Dino Melaye, then a senator representing Kogi West, verbally assaulted Senator Oluremi Tinubu during a closed-door session. According to multiple media reports, Melaye allegedly told Tinubu, “Look, this is not Bourdillon (referring to the Lagos residence of her husband, Bola Tinubu). I will beat you up, impregnate you, and nothing will happen.” While he later denied using the forgoing specific phrasing, he admitted to using harsh language, claiming that he was provoked. Melaye’s statements, steeped in aggression and derogatory undertones, drew widespread condemnation and spotlighted the hostile environment women face, even in the upper echelons of power.  
  
In March 2019, Mr Godiya Akwashiki, then the deputy speaker of the Nasarawa State House of Assembly and senator-elect for Nasarawa North Senatorial District, was involved in a widely publicised incident in Abuja. He was assaulted and stripped naked by individuals who accused him of attempting to engage in an affair with the wife of Alhaji Danladi Envuluanza, a fellow politician from Nasarawa State. A video of the incident circulated widely, showing Akwashiki tied and beaten.  
  
Akwashiki denied the allegations, stating that he had never met Mr Envuluanza’s wife and that the incident was a setup to embarrass him. He claimed that Envuluanza had invited him to the location under false pretence, leading to the assault. Following the incident, the FCT Police Command conducted an investigation. The investigation did not substantiate the allegations against Akwashiki. Instead, it established a prima facie case against Mr Envuluanza and his associates, of criminal conspiracy, abduction, assault, defamation of character, and wrongful restraint.  
  
This pattern extends beyond the Senate to members of the House of Representatives. In 2016, during a visit to Cleveland, United States, for the International Visitor Leadership Program, three Nigerian lawmakers faced serious allegations. James Entwistle, the US ambassador to Nigeria at the time, accused Mohammed Gololo, Samuel Ikon, and Mark Gbillah of misconduct, ranging from attempted rape to the solicitation of prostitution.  
  
Mohammed Gololo, representing Gamawa Federal Constituency, was alleged to have grabbed a hotel chambermaid and solicited sex from her. Despite denying the accusation in a letter to the US Embassy, the fallout was severe, with his visa revoked alongside those of the other accused lawmakers.  
  
Similarly, Samuel Ikon, representing Etinan/Nsit Ibom/Nsit Ubium Federal Constituency, was accused of asking car park attendants to procure prostitutes for him. While he categorically denied the claims, labelling them as a case of mistaken identity, the allegations cast a shadow over his tenure.  
  
C Mark Gbillah, representing Gwer East/Gwer West Federal Constituency, was also implicated in soliciting prostitution. Gbillah dismissed the allegations as an affront to Nigeria’s National Assembly and threatened legal action against the country’s Department of State, Marriott Hotel, the Cleveland Council of World Affairs and the US State Embassy, requesting for damages. Despite their protests, the revocation of their visas and the consequent international embarrassment underscored the gravity of the allegations.  
  
From these stories, it becomes evident that the repercussions of the actions of the mentioned politicians extend beyond individual victims, affecting public trust in political institutions and the very fabric of democracy. By shedding light on these scandals, we aim to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by victims of harassment and the urgent need for reform in political and social systems in Nigeria. Through this exploration, we hope to encourage a dialogue about accountability and the critical importance of creating a safe and respectful environment for all individuals, particularly women, in the political arena.  
  
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