Sexual harassment, intimidation hinder women’s participation in election – Stakeholders

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A coalition of NGOs and other stakeholders on Tuesday identified sexual harassment, intimidation and lack of support as some causes for the declining rate of women’s participation in elections.  
  
This was observed at the launch of the “Stop-Violence against Women in Election” (Stop-VAWIE) campaign project and unveiling of Mrs Stephanie Linus as the project ambassador in Abuja.  
  
The project was launched by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in collaboration with the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), USAID and other partners.  
  
The coalition of NGOs and stakeholders observed that cultural norms, male dominance, high illiteracy level among women also caused the participation and interest in politics to dwindle.  
  
They noted that it was time to take proactive measures in order to end the trend.  
  
Mrs Amina Zakari, the Acting Chairman of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), said that women were often used during elections as source of entertainment or in assisting others carry out party campaign.  
  
Zakari, who was represented by Mrs Toyin Babalola, a staff of the commission, said such role diminished the importance of women, adding that they should reject it as they were capable of holding political offices if they so desired.  
  
She observed that the society was “male dominated” hence women were always sidelined, controlled, harassed and physically abused by men before, during and after elections both in the home and political arena.  
  
“Most of the time we women are the ones who cheat ourselves. We have observed that during campaigns and elections it is even the women who refuse to vote for other women.  
  
“Government needs to strengthen the women through education and economic empowerment because women have all it takes to lead, govern or participate in politics,” Zakari said.  
  
Mrs Ebere Ifendu, President, Women in Politics Forum (WIPF), lamented the inability of most women to participate in politics due to poor economic conditions.  
  
“In Nigeria today, political parties do not get any financial support from government or INEC. The only way they get finances is by sale of party tickets or forms and there are many women who cannot afford these tickets.  
  
“After the elections we observed that the number of women in parliament had dropped; men do not support the women during elections and that is political violence,” she said.  
  
Ifendu called for legislation that will protect, guide and ensure women’s involvement in political processes and during elections.  
  
Blair King, the Team Leader of Democracy and Governance USAID, observed that security of women during elections in the country had become a great concern to the international community.  
  
King said that many women preferred staying in their homes during election due to fear of becoming victims of various forms of violence which could be physical, emotional or psychological.  
  
Dame Pauline Tallen, a former deputy governor of Plateau state, called on women who were victims of violence in election to speak out about their abuse and not keep silent so that others may not fall victim.  
  
“ I have been a victim of violence against women in election. Even though I clearly won the election, the result was overturned and I was booted out; this is part of what women suffer,’’ she said.  
  
Tallen, who was also a 2015 governorship candidate of the state under the APC, said speaking out the ordeal would encourage other women.  
  
Earlier, Mr Jasper Veen, the NDI Country Director, said the project was launched to create public awareness on various forms of violence against women before, during and after elections in Nigeria.  
  
Veen said violence against women in elections included threats, hate speech, assault and blackmail, among others, adding that it often militated their active participation in the electoral process.  
  
“This project will address the link between violence and the low level of women participation in electoral processes.  
  
“It will address acts of election violence such as threats, hate speech, assault and blackmail, etc, directed at someone because of their gender to undermine, delay and influence the electoral process,” he said.  
  
Mrs Hauwa Shekarau, the FIDA President, said the organisation would be in charge of forming group discussions and collating data on violence against women sent by the public through a hotline.  
  
Shekarau said that project would help mitigate violence against women in elections, create advocacy and awareness and also develop mitigations strategies.  
  
“The hotline we will use is 0800 2000 200. All the information gathered before, during and after the elections will be put together and made available to the public,” she said.  
  
The National Human Rights Commission, Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP), the Nigeria Police Force and various civil society organisations pledged their support to the success of the project.  
  
The project was launched as part of campaign efforts and to create awareness ahead of the Kogi and Bayelsa elections holding at the end of the year