

Gender Inclusion and Internal Party Democracy in Nigeria: Assessing the Impact of Quota Systems on Women's Political Participation (2015–2024)

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Abstract: This article explores the involvement of women in Nigeria's democratic processes between 2015 and 2024, highlighting a notable decline in their political participation and representation. It underscores the connection between gender equality and sustainable development, emphasizing that true national progress is unattainable when a significant part of the population is marginalized. The Nigerian political landscape has traditionally been dominated by gender disparities, largely driven by the patriarchal framework of society. The rejection of key gender-focused legislation by a male-dominated parliament represented a missed opportunity to advance gender inclusivity and equality aligned with sustainable development goals. Utilizing a Liberal feminism perspective, the study advocates for gradual improvements through equal rights advocacy and supportive policies. Employing content analysis and drawing on secondary data sources, the research identifies various challenges—cultural, economic, and legal—that restrict women's political engagement. It concludes that despite their capabilities in public and private sectors, women often face a cycle of barriers that impede their leadership potential. These challenges are deeply rooted in societal biases, patriarchy, the struggle to balance family and career aspirations, and limited networking opportunities. The study advises that women should actively seek leadership roles and pursue higher education. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of encouraging parents, particularly in rural areas, to prioritize the education of their daughters to prepare them for future leadership roles.

Keywords: Gender, Internal Party, Democracy, Feminism

I. Introduction

Despite over twenty-six years of democratization, women's political participation in Nigeria remains limited. Although they comprise more than half of the population and have constitutional rights to participate in politics, women are underrepresented in leadership roles. They account for a small number of political offices and are often restricted to positions related to women and social development. This under-representation reflects broader issues of gender bias and a lack of acknowledgment of gender's role in democracy. Nigeria's current representation of women in political decision-making is below the global benchmark of 35%, contributing to their ongoing marginalization. Historically, this exclusion can be traced back to colonialism, which reinforced male superiority. Efforts to address these gender issues are growing, signifying a need for increased inclusivity in Nigeria's political environment. Research methods include library research and analysis of empirical studies to explore these challenges and opportunities for promoting gender inclusiveness.

Statement of the Problem

There is a significant gap in women's inequality, participation, and representation in Nigeria's political system. Since 1999, women's representation in government has declined (Agbalajobi, 2010; Idike et al., 2020). This issue extends globally, affecting even established democracies like the United States (Lewu, 2005; Ramos and Da Silva, 2020). Women's involvement in governance is crucial for democracy and development (Bruce, 2004). Despite constitutional guarantees for equal political opportunities, the reality often falls short. Women's political rights are fundamental to human rights and democracy (Karam, 2000). Nigerian political parties claim commitment to gender equality, yet women's representation remains minimal. Although there's no legal barrier preventing women from participating in politics, their low representation challenges the principle of equal participation in decision-making (National Democratic Institute, 2021). This paper will assess trends in women's political participation and representation in the Nigerian National Assembly during the Fourth Republic and examine the core issues affecting their representation.

Research Objectives

The broad objective of the study is to investigate women's participation in Nigeria's democratic process of the fourth republic. The specific objectives are to:

i. appraise the trend of women's political participation and representation in Nigeria

National Assembly during Nigeria's fourth republic;

ii. examine the fundamental issues of women's political representation in the democratic process of Nigeria's fourth republic.

II. Literature Review

Before colonialism, Nigerian women participated in traditional political governance, holding complementary roles alongside men, although not equal (Ajayi, 2007; Ikpe, 2004). In regions like South-Western Nigeria, influential women such as the "Iyalodes" and "Iyalojas," along with figures like Moremi and Efunsetan, played significant roles (Ojuolape, 2000). Women organized into strong associations, enabling them to voice their political opinions, as seen in Igbo land's community governance structure (Ajayi, 2007). However, colonial policies negatively impacted women's political participation by restricting their electoral and employment opportunities. The denial of equal education further marginalized women, reinforcing male dominance as the colonial regime sidelined women from public life (Ikpe, 2004; Anya, 2003). Women's under-representation in governance began with colonialism and continued as they were largely confined to supportive roles in political parties today (Ette and Akpan-Obong, 2022; Akande, 2002). A study revealed that only 39.7% of husbands permitted their wives to engage in politics, with concerns about family responsibilities deterring many women (Odebiyi and Iwuagwu, 2018). Though, there has been some slight improvement in women's political representation, it remains limited (Aiyede, 2006).

Overview of Women's Political Participation in 2015 – 2023 General Elections

This study reviews women's participation in Nigerian political elections from 2015 to 2024, emphasizing the need for equal engagement in the democratic process. Ojo (2013) highlights that a democratic government should represent all citizens equally, yet Nigeria's political landscape reflects significant under representation of women. Following the restoration of democracy in 1999, Oluyemi (2016) noted hope for gender parity, but women's involvement has remained low. Oyoru (2023) points out that despite efforts to contest for political roles, women's success in elections has been limited. Since 1999, Nigeria has yet to elect a female president or vice president, with a male-dominated trend continuing through various administrations. In the National Assembly, female representation has been minimal, with only three women in the Senate in 1999, growing slightly over the years but still insufficient. Similarly, the House of Representatives has shown fluctuating but low female representation, indicating a consistent pattern of gender inequality in Nigerian politics at all government levels.

The table below provides information on the number of women who have been elected to public office from 2015- 2024

Table 1. Number of women in elected positions from 2015- 2024

Office	Seats Available	2015	2019	2023
President	1	0	0	0
Vice President	1	0	0	0
Senate	109	7	7	4
House of Rep.	360	20	11	16
Governor	36	0	0	0
Deputy Governor	36	6	4	6
State House of Assembly	990	0	40	48

Source: Vanguard 2023

Awofeso and Odeyemi (2014) highlight four key challenges to women's political representation: access, participation, representation, and change. Addressing these issues is vital for empowering women politically and fostering social transformation. Women's roles in politics are significant for three main reasons: decision-making authority, shaping social institutions, and the need for political engagement (Paxton, 2010). Female leaders can impact women's lives positively, while political participation encompasses various activities such as voting and campaigning (Igwe, 2002; Uwa, 2018). Despite increased interest among women in influencing power dynamics, barriers persist in Nigeria, including violence and electoral conflict (Adeniyi, 2003). The debate continues over whether women should focus solely on domestic roles or engage in broader socioeconomic and political activities. Financial constraints and perceptions of qualifications hinder women's political involvement (Guzman, 2004; Asase, 2003). Ojo (2013) further emphasizes how male chauvinism and violence marginalize women in Nigerian politics, making it difficult for them to run for office and lead.

Liberal feminist theory

Burnet (2019) characterizes liberal feminism as a viewpoint that attributes gender inequality to the absence of civil rights and essential social resources such as education and employment for women. Liberal feminists often seek to address these issues through legislative reforms to ensure the protection of individuals' rights (Burnet, 2019). According to Ayetigbo and Ayetigbo

(2023), liberal feminism can be described as advocating for gradual improvements through promoting equal rights for all and implementing laws and policies that foster equality. This perspective emphasizes that women should have the same rights to engage in politics, to run for public office without fear of repercussions, and to make decisions that are significant to society. Both men and women deserve equal rights, and neither should be hindered by education or cultural factors from participating actively in societal affairs. In Nigeria, traditional views that portray women as inferior to men still prevail, largely due to the strong backing of cultural practices that reinforce this subordination. Men continue to dominate in social, political, economic, and religious matters. Women's efforts in politics, their achievements, and contributions to society often go unrecognized. Given these circumstances, it is vital for women to take an active role in political decision-making to secure the status, responsibilities, and rights that are rightfully theirs (Ojo, 2015). In Nigeria, women still face less favorable conditions than men regarding political participation, income, labor force involvement, and representation in parliament (Awofeso and Odeyemi, 2014). To achieve equality, liberal feminism must be emphasized further in Nigeria.

Application of the theory

Nigeria is a society characterized by patriarchy, where men largely hold power over women due to the misguided belief that women are inherently less intelligent and physically capable. This leads to societal discrimination against women. There is a prevailing notion that female subordination stems from customary and legal barriers that hinder women's entry and success in the public sphere. Since 1999, political parties in Nigeria have been prohibited from nominating women on an equal footing for party roles and elected positions, such as those in the National Assembly. In contrast, men have consistently benefited from measures aimed at increasing their numbers in parliament. Factors like the scheduling of political events, which often take place outside of regular working hours when women are typically handling domestic duties, as well as the heightened political violence that disproportionately impacts women, further exacerbate this issue. Women in Nigeria experience discrimination in both appointed and elected roles, particularly in the formulation of policies that affect them, based on the belief that their needs and interests are not adequately represented in the conditions of their lives. This lack of representation in democratic processes undermines the legitimacy of those conditions. As a result of the insufficient number of women in the National Assembly, legislation that could support Nigerian women and vulnerable populations often fails to pass. The study reinforces the argument that greater female representation in the National Assembly is essential.

Challenges against women's active participation in politics

Numerous obstacles have been recognized as hindering women's involvement in social, economic, and political spheres. These challenges are rooted in cultural, economic, and legal factors, among others. This initiative will concentrate on specific barriers that are particularly relevant in Nigeria.

Religious and Socio-Cultural Factors

The societal, political, and economic challenges faced by women are often reinforced by religious beliefs that perpetuate gender stereotypes and discrimination. For example, in certain northern regions of Nigeria, women observe purdah, a practice tied to Islamic customs that confines them to their homes, allowing only their husbands access to them. Their spouses are seen as solely responsible for fulfilling their needs. In many cases, families live in poverty, leading to a culture of silence around their circumstances. Religion plays a crucial role in limiting women's participation in economic and political activities, such as voting and holding office (Ojo, 2013). Islamic teachings are commonly invoked to justify practices such as enforced purdah, early marriages for girls, a lack of educational opportunities, and restrictions on women's political engagement. In many predominantly Muslim states in the north, purdah means that women are kept out of public view and must always be accompanied by a male relative outside their homes, needing permission from their husbands to venture out. Furthermore, women under purdah face strict dress codes, including the requirement to cover their faces in public. There exists a cultural belief that women are unsuitable for leadership roles, reinforcing a narrative that women should be led rather than take on leadership positions. Consequently, many women struggle to attain high-ranking roles due to the prevailing religious and cultural ideologies that hinder gender equality and limit job prospects for both men and women (Ojo, 2013).

Violence and Threats

Political violence significantly diminishes women's participation in politics in Nigeria. The involvement of armed groups before, during, and after elections contributes to an atmosphere of insecurity that endangers lives and property (Awofeso and Odeyemi, 2014), leading to a general exclusion of women from politics. Female candidate Dorathy Nyone recounted her experience: "A ward chairman was shot dead; all the women and many men fled the scene. My partner picked me up and drove me home. I was scared because only men who were prepared for violence remained to count the votes" (Burnet, 2019). This narrative highlights the pervasive issue of electoral violence in Nigeria, instilling fear in many women regarding their participation in politics due to the recent rise in political killings, intimidation, and other violent incidents.

Cost of Elections

In Nigeria, both men and women face challenges in political participation, but women tend to experience these obstacles more intensely. A significant barrier for women is the high cost associated with supporting political parties and campaigns. For instance, the minimum expense for a gubernatorial campaign can reach around 200 million nairas. This raises questions about how many men can raise that amount for women or how many women can independently gather such funds. Given the limited influence

women have over party financing and structures, it's unlikely that a political party would choose a woman for such a role (Burnet, 2019). In a political landscape where considerable funds are required to secure votes and influence decisions, candidates without substantial financial backing are often unable to pursue their ambitions for public office. The nomination fees set by most parties are prohibitively high. Consequently, many women hesitate to engage in politics, as their average economic status contributes to this reluctance. The steep costs associated with running for office, from purchasing nomination forms to campaign logistics, make it particularly challenging for the average woman. Nigeria's political system, which is heavily reliant on financial resources, limits women's ability to participate effectively.

Discriminatory Customs and Laws

The societal norms in many modern nations often discriminate against women, treating them as subordinate to men. This results in women feeling inferior in the socio-political arena, even in urban areas, largely due to cultural stereotypes and behaviors. Socially constructed standards perpetuate the idea of women as "weaker" and cause them to overcompensate by emphasizing their femininity, which can hinder competition with men. Traditionally, families tend to prioritize sending sons to school over daughters, burdening girls with domestic responsibilities instead of educational opportunities. This societal dynamic has led to a higher number of illiterate women, further complicating their ability to compete in politics (Agbalajobi, 2010).

Women's Perception of Politics

There's a prevailing belief that effective politics in Nigeria relies on political aggression and the ability to assert oneself in a turbulent environment, which tends to favor men. Women are often perceived as too passive for political engagement, while men are seen as more competitive, assertive, and prepared to confront challenges. Social norms and conventions further reinforce these gender-specific roles. Women's wariness of violent political tactics and their view of traditional politics as manipulative creates a sense of alienation. Despite the emphasis on the need for women's representation, it remains challenging for them to attain influential positions, as they are often relegated to supportive roles. Many female politicians feel pressure to mimic male behavior to succeed and often approach politics with the belief that they are different from their male counterparts. Additionally, women's inclination toward modesty may hinder their effectiveness in political contests (Agbalajobi, 2010).

Lack of Interest Among Women

A significant number of women display little interest in political involvement. This disinterest can be linked to numerous social factors, such as upbringing, the belief that politics is not a domain for women, and apprehensions about competing against men. Furthermore, social stigma, cultural obstacles, and religious beliefs play a role. According to Ojo (2013), many women may feel that if the world were fair, they would prioritize marriage, motherhood, and domestic roles over political engagement.

Opportunities for Gender Inclusiveness in the political Space

There have always been opportunities for gender inclusion in Nigerian politics, emphasized by influential women like Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and the late Professor Dora Akunyili, who showcased strong leadership. Okpara (2014) notes historical figures like Queen Amina and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, who also demonstrated leadership skills. The 1995 United Nations Beijing Declaration aimed for 35% affirmative action for women in political representation, providing a framework for promoting gender inclusion globally. Komiti & Ekharefo (2022) highlight the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a catalyst for addressing gender inequality and encouraging countries to develop strategies for education, health, and political inclusivity. Nations like Rwanda have enacted laws ensuring gender equality, such as a 35% affirmative action for women and protections against gender-based violence (Anifowose & Odeyemi, 2019). Despite Nigeria's potential for integrating gender-sensitive policies, recent gender bills were rejected due to political resistance and a patriarchal culture that limits women's roles. Odigie and Ebunuwele (2022) argue that a more inclusive parliament would enhance civic engagement and promote fairness in governance.

III. Conclusion and Recommendation

Gender inclusivity in Nigeria's political landscape is achievable with the right dedication and political resolve. The example of Rwanda demonstrates that gender equality can become a reality within the African political context when there is genuine commitment. This study suggests that the Nigerian government should take inspiration from Rwanda's political achievements and actively work to integrate gender considerations into its constitution and political framework. The development of any society depends on the collective contributions of all individuals. Achieving sustainable development requires gender equality, as both men and women play crucial roles in national progress.

The study concludes with the following recommendations:

- i. Overcoming harmful sociocultural stereotypes, patriarchy, religious influences, and gender biases against women's political participation requires more than just a change in attitudes. Women aspiring to leadership roles in both public and private sectors should actively seek these positions and pursue higher education. To combat illiteracy and prepare girls for future leadership, it is essential to encourage parents, particularly in rural communities, to enroll their daughters in schools.
- ii. A female leader should not feel pressured to adopt overly masculine traits to succeed, nor should she allow traditionally "feminine" qualities to hinder her effectiveness. Instead, female leaders should focus on the goals of their departments and

organizations. To combat self-doubt, it's important to encourage women to silence any inner voices that might prevent them from making tough decisions, advocating for themselves, or stepping outside their comfort zones.

iii. Existing policies and laws aimed at empowering women in leadership roles have not effectively tackled sociocultural stereotypes that hinder women's access to these opportunities. This study recommends a thorough review of current women empowerment policies to better reflect reality and suggests that the government create a network of women leaders to facilitate the sharing of experiences and challenges, thereby motivating aspiring female leaders.

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