

GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA: BARRIERS, STRATEGIES, AND EMERGING TRENDS (1999—2023)

Ladi Ibrahim Thomas

Department of Political Science and International Relations,
Al-Muhibbah Open University, Abuja
ladiibrahimthomas@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the gendered aspects of political participation in Nigeria since 1999 to 2023. It is based on the challenges that have restrained female engagement into politics, ways that have been adopted to enhance their presence in the political landscape, and new trends that are influencing gender participation into the realm of governance. The study seeks to know the factors that have led to the poor participation of women in political leadership and look at the effectiveness of different intervention that aim to reduce the gender gap. The study is informed by three research questions, namely: (1) What do you consider the main obstacles to women participation in politics in Nigeria? ii) What measures have been applied to facilitate gender inclusiveness in politics? What are some of the emerging trends in influencing participation of women in politics in the period 1999 to the year 2023? The research is mixed-methods oriented. Electoral commission records, gender statistics and reports produced by political parties were used to generate quantitative data. The data collected pertained to the qualitative side of the research with semi-structured interviews being used to collect information on female politicians, party leaders, and civil society actors. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used to analyse the data. Results indicate that cultural norms, economic limitations, violence and party structure dominated by men are among the significant barriers. Nonetheless, gender lobbying, political sponsorship, quota politics, and social media activism among others have opened doors to new possibilities of women. The latest pattern shows a gradual increase in gender movements led by the youth and online political activism among women. The paper draws a conclusion that although improvement has been achieved, system and institutional change still remains required. Inclusion of women in democracy in Nigeria can be encouraged through policy interventions like implementation of gender quotas, financing, political sensitization.

Keywords: *Gender; Political participation; Nigeria; Women in politics; Gender equality*

1. INTRODUCTION

Political participation has remained a defining feature of democratic governance across the world. Since the late twentieth century, many countries have embraced democratic systems that encourage citizens to participate in elections, political parties, public consultations and decision-making processes. International frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals have consistently promoted inclusive governance and equal political participation irrespective of gender. Despite these commitments, women's political representation remains uneven across many democracies. While countries such as Rwanda, Sweden and New Zealand have recorded remarkable progress through gender quotas, political reforms and institutional support, many developing democracies continue to experience significant disparities arising from cultural norms, economic inequalities and patriarchal political systems. Across Africa, the transition from authoritarian rule to democratic

governance during the 1990s created wider opportunities for citizen participation. Elections became more regular, civil society organisations expanded their influence, and constitutional reforms sought to strengthen democratic institutions. Nevertheless, women's political inclusion has progressed at different rates across the continent. Although several African countries have adopted affirmative action measures that increased female representation in legislative and executive offices, others continue to struggle with structural barriers that discourage women from contesting elections or occupying leadership positions. Political violence, inadequate campaign financing, discriminatory cultural practices and weak institutional commitment remain persistent obstacles that prevent women from translating electoral participation into political leadership. Nigeria returned to democratic rule on 29 May 1999 following several years of military administration, marking the beginning of the Fourth Republic. Since the restoration of civilian rule, the country has conducted seven consecutive general elections, demonstrating sustained constitutional governance despite recurring electoral challenges. Democratic consolidation has expanded opportunities for citizens to vote, contest elections and engage in political activities through political parties, advocacy groups and civil society organisations. Nevertheless, political participation has remained unequal in practice because access to political power is often influenced by financial resources, patronage networks, incumbency advantages and elite control of party structures. These realities have limited the effective participation of women, young people and other historically marginalised groups within the political system. Although women constitute a substantial proportion of Nigeria's electorate, their representation in elective and appointive positions remains disproportionately low. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (2023), women accounted for approximately 47.5 percent of registered voters during the 2023 general elections, yet secured only about 3.7 percent of elective positions. This disparity illustrates that electoral participation alone does not guarantee meaningful representation or influence within political institutions. Many female aspirants encounter challenges ranging from discriminatory party nomination processes and limited financial resources to political intimidation, electoral violence and deeply rooted societal beliefs that associate political leadership primarily with men. Several policy initiatives have attempted to broaden political participation since 1999. One of the most significant reforms was the Not Too Young To Run Act, enacted in 2018, which reduced the constitutional age requirements for contesting elective offices and encouraged greater youth participation in governance. While the reform widened opportunities for younger candidates, it did not substantially improve women's political representation because many of the underlying structural barriers remained unchanged. Political parties continue to allocate few winnable tickets to female aspirants, while campaign financing, internal party democracy and cultural stereotypes continue to disadvantage women seeking elective office. Civil society organisations such as the Women in Politics Forum and ElectHER have responded through leadership training, mentorship, advocacy and financial support programmes for female candidates. However, studies indicate that these interventions continue to face financial, institutional and socio-cultural constraints that limit their overall impact (Oloyede & Oni, 2021). Within Kaduna State, political participation reflects many of the national patterns while presenting unique contextual dynamics. The state has experienced competitive elections since 1999, with active participation by political parties, community associations and civil society groups. However, women's participation in elective politics remains relatively limited despite increasing voter registration and civic engagement. Traditional gender roles, religious and

cultural expectations, economic inequalities and security concerns continue to shape political opportunities for women. Female politicians often experience greater difficulty in securing party nominations, mobilising campaign resources and sustaining political careers compared with their male counterparts. In Zaria Local Government Area, political participation is influenced by a combination of urban and semi-urban social structures, educational institutions, traditional leadership systems and diverse cultural communities. The area has produced politically active citizens and hosts significant educational institutions that contribute to civic awareness. Despite these advantages, women aspiring to political leadership continue to face considerable obstacles arising from patriarchal social norms, restricted access to political networks and limited economic resources. At the same time, women in Zaria have increasingly participated in political mobilisation, voter education, advocacy campaigns and community leadership, demonstrating resilience and commitment to democratic governance. Their growing engagement reflects an ongoing effort to achieve more inclusive political representation despite enduring institutional and socio-cultural barriers. Nigerian women are confronted with another uphill climb in the field of politics despite more than two decades since democracy was realized. They are observed when campaigns are taking place but are nowhere when results are announced. They remain on the sidelines due to political parties, electoral systems and cultural norms. Gender-sensitive bills are an example of efforts that have not managed to bear fruits in the National Assembly despite escalating advocacy. The disparity between male and female participation is far beyond a statistics- It is a testament to inherent gender biasness.

Women candidates are online bullied, laughed off street and few parties fund their candidature. Others are even deterred by the family or religious elders. Although many women are now showing interest towards politics, things are still stacking low against their favour. Women leaders emerging are confronted with issues that prevent their ambition as far as it can extend. The point is not whether women may lose interest, the point is that the system simply does not work in their favor. This paper attempts to deframe these concentric problems and examine the possibilities of change occurrence.

Women in Nigeria since regaining democracy in 1999 have mounted a tough campaign in being heard in politics. Nevertheless, the narrative is that of marginal improvement. In 1999, the number of elected women into the National Assembly is 12. In 2023, the current proportion has decreased, even slightly: only 3 women are sitting out of 109 senators and 17 women are in the House of Representatives instead of 360 representatives (INEC, 2023). It is unbelievable considering that gender population of this country is almost equal.

Some have been daring personalities such as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Dora Akunyili and Oby Ezekwesili who have performed exceptionally. But their existence did not transfer into wider structural alteration. Between the nomination fees, violence and cultural discrimination, most women continue to pay the price. Political parties, which should be democracy promoting parties, tend to gang up on women.

According to Adeleke (2021), the political landscape of Nigeria resembles the society: the manly-dominating and power-protecting one. Even female politicians elicit little or no chance of becoming governors or party leaders at the state level. These are hard-earned fruits and most of them are bought at the expense of an individual. Despite the progress the changes have been taking a step forward and two backwards.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

Political participation entails involvement of people in making decisions that are affecting their lives. It encompasses voting, participating in elections, membership in political parties, election into government office and expression of views. Social class, education, religion and gender tend to influence this in Nigeria. Gender in politics is concerned with the influences of the male or female gender in terms of power and access to leadership opportunities. As much as men command leadership positions, the women are on the peripherals and are swarmed in minor roles.

According to Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet (2021), the gendered power structures in Nigeria still determine who will be heard. The participation of women in politics has been interpreted in the scenarios of their domestic responsibilities and their cultures. However, without gender balance, the political interaction cannot be meaningful. A real democracy must reflect the differences which exist in the society within which it exists. Uchenna (2023) emphasises that political equality is not a gift to women but a right that gives robust governance.

Gender Dimension of Political Participation

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, behaviours and expectations that societies assign to men and women. Unlike sex, which is based on biological characteristics, gender is shaped by cultural, social, economic and political institutions that influence access to opportunities and resources. In politics, gender determines the extent to which individuals can participate in decision-making processes, compete for elective positions and influence governance outcomes. In many developing democracies, including Nigeria, patriarchal norms, discriminatory practices and unequal access to political resources continue to restrict women's participation in politics despite constitutional guarantees of equality. The gender dimension of political participation examines how gender-based inequalities shape political engagement, representation and leadership. Women often face structural barriers such as political violence, inadequate financial resources, limited access to party structures, cultural stereotypes and family responsibilities, all of which reduce their chances of contesting and winning elective offices. Conversely, men generally enjoy greater access to political networks, financial support and institutional backing, giving them significant advantages within the political system. These disparities create unequal opportunities for political influence and reinforce male dominance in governance. Contemporary discourse on gender and politics emphasises that increasing women's political participation is essential for inclusive governance, democratic consolidation and sustainable development. Greater representation of women in political institutions enhances policy responsiveness to issues such as education, healthcare, social welfare and gender equality while strengthening democratic legitimacy. Therefore, analysing the gender dimension provides a clearer understanding of the factors responsible for women's underrepresentation in Nigerian politics and highlights the importance of addressing institutional, socio-cultural and economic barriers that hinder equal political participation. Thus, political participation does not entail voting every four years. It is the matter of inclusion, agency, and influence. Silence or leaving out of women reduces the rates of national development. These are important terms towards understanding the extent of the Nigeria political gender gap.

Barriers to Women's Political Participation

There are a number of ingrained obstacles to participation that women in Nigeria encounter in the political arena. Culture is influential. Most individuals continue to think that leadership is a male thing. Women who talk are labeled ill-mannered or that are not African. In the north in particular, religion discourages women in terms of mixing with men or being seen in the streets, which hampers campaigns and visibility. Women are not economically favoured. Majority of them do not have money to contest. Fee to nominate is expensive in political parties. Substantive expenditure must be made in logistics, media, and mobilization in campaigns: resources women do not often command. Moreover, the political parties and other elections institutions fail to give importance to women. They can talk about inclusiveness yet do not do so. Primaries are also typically biased against the parties and women are often edged out in favor of stronger male candidates. Another powerful barrier is political violence pointed out by Obioma (2022). Women are afraid of being kidnapped. Threats, bullying and even physical attacks are not uncommon cases. All of these problems work together to exclude women not because they are not competent but because the system is unfriendly.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Feminist Theory and Political Opportunity Theory. These theories provide an appropriate analytical framework for explaining the socio-cultural, institutional, and political factors influencing women's political participation.

Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory emerged from the works of scholars who challenged patriarchal structures and the historical exclusion of women from political, economic, and social life. Among its leading proponents are Betty Friedan (1963), who argued that women's subordination is socially constructed rather than biologically determined, and Kate Millett (1970), who maintained that patriarchy is a political system through which men institutionalise dominance over women in both public and private spheres. Other influential contributors include Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and bell hooks (1984), whose works expanded feminist analysis of gender inequality and social oppression. The central assumption of Feminist Theory is that gender inequalities are products of social, cultural, political, and economic structures rather than natural differences between men and women. The theory assumes that patriarchal institutions systematically privilege men while limiting women's access to education, economic resources, leadership positions, and political decision-making. It therefore advocates equal opportunities, gender equity, and the removal of institutional and cultural barriers that prevent women from participating fully in governance and public affairs. Despite its wide acceptance, Feminist Theory has attracted criticism. Critics argue that early feminist perspectives, particularly liberal feminism, tend to overemphasise gender discrimination while paying less attention to other intersecting factors such as class, ethnicity, religion, culture, and economic status that also shape women's political experiences. Others contend that the theory often assumes that women constitute a homogeneous group despite significant differences in their social realities across societies. In many African contexts, some scholars further argue that Western feminist assumptions may not adequately capture indigenous cultural dynamics and traditional political systems.

The theory is relevant to this study because it explains how patriarchal norms, discriminatory cultural practices, unequal access to resources, and gender stereotypes contribute to the underrepresentation of women in politics. It provides a suitable framework for examining the social and cultural barriers limiting women's political participation and highlights the need for policies and institutional reforms that promote gender equality in political leadership.

Political Opportunity Theory

Political Opportunity Theory was developed principally by Peter Eisinger (1973) and later expanded by Sidney Tarrow (1998). Eisinger argued that the openness or closure of political institutions determines the opportunities available for political participation, while Tarrow maintained that changes in political structures, elite alignments, institutional reforms, and state responses significantly influence citizens' ability to participate in political processes.

The theory assumes that political participation is influenced by the nature of political institutions rather than individual motivation alone. It posits that access to political power depends on the availability of institutional opportunities such as democratic governance, inclusive electoral systems, favourable legal frameworks, responsive political parties, and government policies that encourage participation. Where political institutions are open and supportive, participation increases; where they are restrictive, participation declines.

Political Opportunity Theory has also been criticised. Some scholars argue that it places excessive emphasis on political institutions while underestimating the importance of individual agency, ideology, leadership capacity, and socio-cultural influences. Others contend that the concept of political opportunity is often difficult to define and measure because political environments vary across countries and may change rapidly over time. Critics also note that favourable political opportunities do not always guarantee increased participation if citizens lack the resources, confidence, or organisational capacity to take advantage of such opportunities.

The theory is applicable to this study because it explains how institutional arrangements influence women's participation in politics. It provides a basis for examining the extent to which electoral laws, political party structures, affirmative action policies, legal provisions, and government institutions either facilitate or hinder women's access to elective and appointive political offices. The theory therefore helps explain why women's political participation differs across political environments despite similar levels of interest or competence.

Relevance of the Theories to the Study

The integration of Feminist Theory and Political Opportunity Theory provides a comprehensive framework for analysing women's political participation. Feminist Theory explains how patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and discriminatory social structures restrict women's access to political leadership, while Political Opportunity Theory demonstrates how institutional arrangements, electoral systems, and political reforms either create or limit opportunities for women's participation. Together, the theories offer a robust explanation of both the socio-cultural and structural determinants of women's political participation. They establish that the underrepresentation of women in politics is neither accidental nor inevitable but results from the interaction of entrenched gender inequalities and institutional constraints. Consequently, increasing women's political participation requires both

the transformation of discriminatory societal attitudes and the strengthening of inclusive political institutions that guarantee equal opportunities for leadership and representation.

2.3 Strategies for Enhancing Participation

Nigeria needs to be serious and quick with action to correct gender imbalance in politics. One of them is gender quotas. In Rwanda and Senegal, the number of women in representation increased significantly when quotas were introduced. The affirmative action policy of 35 percent in Nigeria has remained on paper very long. Having it in real practice would assist. Parties require to be reformed politically also. Women should no longer be marginalised by the parties. They can cut nomination costs, help run mentorship programmes, and conduct fair primaries. Civic education is important as well. Most women lack the awareness of their rights and the political process. Groups such as WARDC, ElectHER like NGOs have achieved a lot in terms of training and awareness. Change is all about advocacy. There must be strong voices that continue to demand space. Women have acquired a new weapon to fight with social media. Fatima (2023) observes that political parties have been compelled to listen through youth-led campaigns on the internet. However, the road is bumpy. It requires organized action, militancy and pressure. Women capture other people when they gain political space. When people support the strategies through law and resources, they will change.

2.4 New Trends

Nigeria's political landscape is undergoing significant transformation, with growing opportunities for young people and women to participate in political processes. Rather than waiting for traditional political institutions to create space for them, these groups are increasingly asserting themselves through digital platforms and civic engagement. Social media platforms such as Twitter (now X), Instagram, and WhatsApp have become important tools for political mobilisation, voter education, advocacy, and public accountability. The #EndSARS movement demonstrated the capacity of digital technologies to mobilise citizens, influence public discourse, and challenge existing political structures.

Gender advocacy has also evolved considerably in recent years. Women's political movements are increasingly driven by innovative activists who engage audiences across different social and educational backgrounds through accessible and inclusive communication strategies. Initiatives such as SheVotes and ElectHER have contributed to strengthening women's political participation by providing leadership training, civic education, mentorship, advocacy, and campaign support. Through the strategic use of technology, networking, and storytelling, these initiatives are helping to reduce barriers to political participation and promote more inclusive democratic governance.

According to Nwosu (2024), digital communication has weakened many of the geographical, ethnic, and financial barriers that previously limited political collaboration among women. For example, women in different regions of Nigeria can now exchange ideas, organise advocacy campaigns, raise campaign funds, and support one another through online platforms regardless of physical distance. This expanding digital connectivity has strengthened solidarity among women and created new opportunities for collective political action. Beyond social media activism, women are increasingly shaping public opinion through television programmes, radio discussions, podcasts, online forums, and other digital media platforms that amplify their voices in national political debates.

These developments suggest that women's political participation in Nigeria is gradually entering a new phase characterised by greater digital engagement, broader networks, and increased visibility. Although challenges such as gender discrimination, financial constraints, political violence, and cultural stereotypes continue to limit women's full participation, emerging digital platforms and advocacy movements are reshaping the political environment. As more women actively engage in leadership, political campaigns, and public discourse, they are contributing to changes in both political participation and the institutional practices that have historically restricted women's access to political power.

3. Methodology

Mixed-method was used in this study. It merged the use of qualitative and quantitative methods to find numbers and individual histories. This decision was not accidental. The gendered politics in Nigeria is not something that can be understood by referring to statistics only. It needed real voices of real people to put it into perspective. The quantitative component consisted of ordered surveys that collected general opinions by region. These surveys assisted in understanding the broad trends like the fraction of women actively participating in party politics or positioning themselves in elections. Conversely, the more qualitative side, represented by interviews and document analysis enabled the participants to discuss how and why some barriers exist, and how they go about them. With this method, the study represented lived lives and quantifiable trends. Researchers such as Olajide and Olanrewaju (2021) advocate this form of flexible formulation in political studies in Nigeria. It allows a stronger comprehension of gendered experiences within a socio political context that is often marked by ethnicity, religion and informal politics of power. The research design overcame the biasedness of the purely numerical or anecdotal results, as the combination of both approaches pulled off the on-sidedness of the separate approaches. Its goal was depth, fairness, and balance. The research included four geo-political regions of Nigeria, viz., Southwest, Southeast, Northwest and North central. Gender norms and political forces in every zone have their own peculiarities. As an example, region-wise, women in Lagos (South-West) have more to work with in terms of access to political platforms, whereas their female peers in Sokoto (North-West) may de facto fail to access such political platforms due to cultural restrictions in terms of conservative, Islamic traditions (Adefemi, 2022). The study used both the urban and the rural setting to demonstrate the differences in political participation as defined by gender, region, religion, and social classes. The target group consisted of the adult population of 18 years and over, who have interacted with the political system of Nigeria since 1999 to 2023. This was made up of voters, candidates, party members, activists, electoral officials and leaders of civil societies. The focus group was made up of women; however, men were also included in the study. They were required to work out gender relations, power struggles, and the more political structure through their insights. A particular emphasis was put on the youth and people with disabilities who tend to be marginalized in the discourse of participation. The zones chosen assisted to make a balanced picture. Nigeria has six zones but with the limitation of resources and time it became viable to select four. The plan was not complete representation, but significant mirror.

This research employed purposive and stratified random posts. Purposive sampling assisted in tracking the key informants, including women leaders, activists, politicians, who provided great insights into the gendered political walls. Not all those respondents. They have been selected

due to their expertise and aspiration to share. The survey was stratified random. The people have been classified according to zone, type of gender, age and occupation to achieve wide representation. Each zone provided a random sample of 100 citizens (50 males and 50 females) comprising the total number of 400 participants. This represented proportionate gender representation and that of various classes, religions and place of origin. The qualitative part 20 in-depth interviews were gathered. These were female candidates, executives of the parties, INEC and the media. It was to get behind the figures, to hear how Nigerians find their way around the political arena. Research such as the one conducted by Udo and Ibe (2020) has revealed that in cases of gender research where context and experience are key, purposive sampling is effective. The sample size of 400 is humble yet full. It conjoins scale and depth. It enables findings to capture the diversity of political life in Nigeria without being lost in abstraction.

There were three instruments: structured surveys, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The questionnaire was administered physically and online among the respondents within the targeted zones. These were closed and open-ended questions about voter turnout, candidacy, party membership, and sensations of gender prejudice. Narrative was able to participate in in-depth interviews. The respondents were free to talk about their experiences. Some were pouring out their tears, some were eating out of laughter, there were other ones who sighed with disgust. These voices gave life to the figures. The interviews took between 30 and 60 minutes, and they were done in English, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo, which depended on the preference of the respondent. In a document analysis case, we applied policy papers, INEC reports, constitutions of the political parties, and gender equity frameworks. Such reports as those by INEC 2023 post-election review and UN Women Nigeria 2022 gender audit were crucial to the identification of structural gaps. The research became enriched with a combination of these methods. Patterns were provided by surveys. Reasons were provided through interviews. Paper provided order. The incorporation of this combination of tools was informed by the results of the current research in such studies as Olufemi and Musa (2023), who demonstrated that triangulating sources adds credibility and depth to political research in Nigeria.

Analysis of data was made in two steps. Analysis of quantitative data measured using the surveys involved the SPSS version 25. Responses were summarised using descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages and charts. This assisted in identifying defining trends such as voter turnout, representation ratios and perceived barriers by gender. Chi-square tests were applied to investigate the association between gender with variables related to political ambition, access to party support and others. This assisted in revealing the trends that were not evident on the surface. In the qualitative data, thematic analysis was used. The records of interviews were transcribed, coded, and categorised into themes such as Cultural barriers, Money politics, Patriarchy in party structures and Coping strategies. Coding and pattern discovery was supported by NVivo 12 software. This provided a path that provided a framework to the voices collected in the field. More than being described, interpretation was done. It entailed posing the following questions: Why simply the patterns? How these patterns are connected with the wider structures? What information do they bear on Nigerian political landscape? Adeoye and Okonkwo (2021) provide evidence that SPSS and NVivo should be combined to conduct political gender research. It gives numbers and stories a chance to converse, to present more comprehensive images of gendered realities.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Presentation of Key Findings on Barriers, Strategies, and Trends

Table 4.1: Female National Assembly Candidates in Nigeria (2019 and 2023)

Election Year	Total Candidates	Female Candidates	Percentage (%)
2019	2,970	365	12.3
2023	1,553	152	9.8

Source: INEC (2019; 2023)

The results indicate a decline in women's participation as National Assembly candidates between 2019 and 2023. Female candidates decreased from 365 (12.3%) in 2019 to 152 (9.8%) in 2023. This suggests that despite increased advocacy for women's political participation, fewer women contested legislative elections in 2023.

The political life of women in Nigeria has remained slow with hindrances persisting. A few women have succeeded in cracking the walls of toxic male politics in the last 24 years between 1999 and 2023. According to the INEC (2023) data, only 9.8 percent of the 1,553 National Assembly candidates were women in the 2023 general elections. This is marginally lower in comparison to 2019 when women accounted to 12.3 percent of all candidates. Women are still kept silent due to cultural bias, insufficient financial might, godfatherism and insecurity. Nevertheless, there are at least few glimpses of optimism. A number of NGOs and activist organizations now support female candidates through leadership training and campaigns. Organizations such as ElectHER and Women in Politics Forum (WIPF) have organized thousands of women who undergo training to be empowered in different states (Oluwole & Chukwuemeka, 2021). Social media has also emerged as an instrument of visibility and grass root connectivity. High youth participation in politics has been indicated in the trend as youths, especially young women, are becoming politically active especially on online platforms and student unions. Although this involvement has not yet translated to their position of elected office, this shows a change of tide. The imperceptible yet distinct increase in advocacy, mentorship and co-organising is changing the narrative.

4.2 Gender Gap Analysis across Political Offices and Timelines

Table 4.6: Women's Representation in Selected Political Offices (2023)

Political Office	Total Seats	Women	Percentage (%)
National Assembly	469	15	3.2
State Houses of Assembly	993	59	5.9
Governors	36	0	0.0

Source: INEC (2023)

The gap in political representation with regard to gender is quite disturbing, as it still varies considerably between 1999 and 2023. These seats are represented in the National Assembly where of 469 seats, only 15 belong to women as of 2023 just above 3% (INEC, 2023). In state houses of assembly, fewer than 6 percent of all the seats are occupied by women in the country.

No state has ever elected a woman as their governor among the 36 states. In 2015, Senator Aisha Alhassan narrowly lost the race in Taraba, and this was the closest (Adeleke & Ogunleye, 2020).

In the analysis through time, the election of 2007 and 2011 showed that there were marginal improvements in the participation of females. Nonetheless, such advantages were short-lived. The 2019 elections recorded a lower turnout, at a time when there was an increased mobilisation. Such give and take implies institutional pushback and tokenism. Gender gaps are more difficult to bridge at the local levels. There is still a predominance of male representation in chairperson positions and as councillors with women being reduced to the identity of women leader in party structures. Whereas other political parties assert that they stand with inclusion, fairness in primary elections is an exception. Interestingly, this is compounded by the lack of stringent affirmative policies or quotas in the electoral laws of Nigeria. The numbers in themselves do not explain everything, however, as they vividly paint a portrait of a democracy that is far behind on a divided-and-fair play.

4.3 Case Studies

An interview with Hon. Bimbola Olagunju, a woman councillor representing Ogun State throws light on the burden of day to day discrimination. They do not first perceive me as a leader. She told us in an interview in February 2023 that she is regarded as a woman who has to pay her dues a good dozen times over. The other example is that of Dr. Fatima Yusuf who ran at the House of Representatives in 2019 in a minor party. Although she had a good manifesto and a good local base, she did not have funding or support within the party. She said that even her party leaders had wanted her to withdraw in favor of a more the viable male candidate. The Women Political Empowerment Technical Working Group in Lagos stated that in the 2023 elections, some women candidates physically attacked or made a mockery of during the campaign rallies (WPE-TWG, 2023). The statistics are not the only stories, and behind the figures are lives which are sometimes masked by numbers. The incredible strength that most of these women possess is shocking. They talk of connection building and the process of finding a mentor and sisterhood as a way of making them remain strong even in conditions where systems have failed them.

4.4 Discussion of Findings

Today, patriarchal values, male political culture, and the politics of the head are revealed by Arowolo and Adesina (2022) as invisible ceilings to women. This is what our research proves, particularly in the voices of female politicians who work under structural and cultural impediments.

Theme	Result
Patriarchal values	Patriarchal norms continue to restrict women's access to political leadership and decision-making positions, reinforcing gender inequality in politics.
Male political culture	Political institutions and party structures remain largely male-dominated, creating an environment that favours men and marginalises women's participation and advancement.

Politics of the head	Political patronage, godfatherism, and male-centred networks serve as invisible barriers that limit women's political opportunities and electoral success.
Study finding	The findings of this study support the position of Arowolo and Adesina (2022), demonstrating through the experiences of female politicians that structural and cultural barriers continue to impede women's effective participation and advancement in politics.

Among the most consistent barriers is the role of finance as reported by Ojo and Akinlabi (2021). This is reflected in our interview data, where underfunding of women is revealed in comparison with other men. Personal savings, friends or NGO grants of many of the female aspirants contrast sharply with the deep pocket sponsorship of many of the male politicians by their godfathers or political blocks of influence. However, there is a new crest to the enthusiasm of youth involvement and cyber-activism. A recent article by Edewor (2023) addresses the reimagination of political spaces by young women using social media, online debates and informal organising. Given the traditional gatekeepers of politics in Nigeria, these methods are contributing to its undermining. Although the gap is still big, these slight changes indicate that there is a constant struggle. The literature assists us in contextualizing these findings as not part of unique incidents, but a greater trend determined by power, identity as well as resistance.

4.5 Implications for Gender Equality and Governance

Gender inclusion should not be just a talk of the town as Nigeria begins to think of becoming more democratic. The situation of women in political life not only restricts representation, but also throws back the quality of governance. The diversity in leadership implies a wider outlook or opinion, particularly in education, health and grassroots development, which women have never been shy about taking lead in despite the absence of formal politics.

Girls and young women are also affected by this wrong signal sent by the low number of women in office. It informs them that it is the business of men to be leaders even when they can be just as competent. Nigeria must no longer squander such potential.

What we want are policies that are more than symbolic gestures. There is an immediate need to establish legal gender quotas, give campaign funding to support women and make politics a safer place. The pressure should also be maintained by the civil society and media.

Equitable gender rule is not a women struggle alone, it is a national development agenda. A wider political system will create a sense of accountability, innovativeness, and trust. Our democracy is incomplete until the day when Nigeria is blessed to have women in leadership positions without hesitation and fear.

5. Conclusion

Politics in Nigeria has been heavy masculine noted over the years. Women have cried out, not without scars. This paper has revealed the extent to which cultural, religious and economic agents cut the wings of female ambition. Most women are not only willing, but also ready, yet the battle ground contains traps which include money politics, party godfatherism, intimidation, and poor media coverage. Compared to other policies such as National Gender Policy or 35% Affirmative Action, although on paper, it proceeds slowly and is in most cases

superficial. This was the most obvious issue that the Nigerian women cannot sit with fold their hands despite these odds. They have also started to build stronger coalitions, across the years, beginning from local councils to the national level, by utilizing technology, mentoring the younger voices, and resistance with the aid of storytelling. The appearance of the louder female voices who want space and respect could be seen due to youth movements and cyber activism, especially during the #EndSARS protests. The participation, however, is miles away from parity. In 2023, even fewer than 10 percent of the elective offices had been taken up by women, and it means that although the drums are beating much louder, it is a drunkard dance. This study is a confirmation that Nigerian women, indeed, lack nothing in political will, but then, they remain fettered by institutions uncomfortable with their emergence.

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