

# Women's Parliamentary Representation in Nigeria: Evidence from the 2023 Elections

## Representación Parlamentaria de las Mujeres en Nigeria: Evidencia de las Elecciones de 2023

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## Abstract

This study examines the representation of women in the Nigerian Parliament, focusing on the 2023 general elections. Despite global strides toward gender parity, Nigeria continues to face a critical deficit in female legislative representation, consistently ranking among the lowest worldwide. The 2023 elections yielded particularly disheartening results, with women securing only 15 out of 469 seats in the National Assembly. Utilizing a qualitative approach grounded in the supply and demand model of candidate selection, this research explores the complex interplay between a diminished "supply" of female aspirants and a low "demand" for women MPs within Nigeria's deeply patriarchal society. The study identifies sociocultural, structural, institutional, and political barriers as the primary drivers of this disparity. Finally, it assesses the broader implications of this underrepresentation and proposes strategic interventions, including legislative quotas, enhanced financial support, tailored leadership training, and strengthened networking among women's advocacy groups.

**Keywords:** gender equality, National Assembly, political participation, women's representation



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## Resumen

Este estudio se centra en la representación de las mujeres en el parlamento nigeriano, utilizando las elecciones generales de 2023 como estudio de caso. Sostiene que Nigeria enfrenta un desafío significativo debido a la baja representación de las mujeres en su parlamento nacional, ubicándose entre los niveles más bajos del mundo. Las elecciones generales de 2023 presentan un panorama desalentador para la representación femenina, con solo 15 mujeres elegidas en la Asamblea Nacional de 469 miembros. El estudio investiga las causas y las implicaciones de la subrepresentación de las mujeres en el parlamento nacional de Nigeria. Empleando un enfoque de investigación cualitativo y basándose en el modelo teórico de oferta y demanda en la selección de candidatos, el estudio destaca la compleja interacción entre el reducido interés de las mujeres en la política electoral y la baja demanda pública de mujeres parlamentarias en la altamente patriarcal sociedad nigeriana. El estudio identifica factores socioculturales, estructurales, institucionales, de información y conocimiento, así como de oportunidades políticas, como las principales causas de la subrepresentación. Asimismo, analiza las implicaciones de esta situación y propone medidas para remediarla, entre ellas la implementación de un sistema de cuotas, un mayor apoyo financiero a las candidatas, programas de formación en liderazgo adaptados y una mejor coordinación y creación de redes entre las organizaciones de mujeres.

**Palabras clave:** igualdad de género, Asamblea Nacional, participación política, representación de las mujeres.

## Introduction

From the early 1990s, women's representation in the legislative arm of government has attracted significant international attention and become a recurring theme in the literature on gender and politics (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022; Sanjaume-Calvet *et al.*, 2023). The global push for gender inclusion in parliaments has been driven by rights advocates and progressive political figures who regard women's political participation as an extension of fundamental human rights and a democratic imperative (Ballington, 2010). It also reflects an effort to redress historical injustices arising from women's exclusion and the persistence of gender inequalities in public life (Gyabeng *et al.*, 2018).

Nigeria's experience presents a paradox. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and more than two decades of multiparty democracy,

women remain significantly underrepresented in politics. The 2023 general elections were widely anticipated as an opportunity to consolidate democratic inclusion and break entrenched gender and generational hierarchies (Nkereuwem, 2023; Akinyetun, 2023). This expectation was amplified by demographic realities. In 2024, women constituted approximately 115.1 million (49.4 percent) of Nigeria's 232.7 million (World Bank, 2024). However, the electoral outcomes of the 2023 elections proved disappointing. Women accounted for only about 10 percent of the more than 15,000 candidates who contested positions ranging from the presidency to state assemblies. The dominant parties, the All-Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), provided limited openings for female aspirants, forcing roughly 90 percent of female candidates to run under smaller parties with minimal chanc-

es of victory (Nkereuwem, 2023). Consequently, the 10th National Assembly, inaugurated after the elections, comprises only four women in the Senate and eleven in the House of Representatives – a mere 3.62 percent of total seats – marking a decline from previous assemblies (Sule, 2023). This pattern was mirrored at the state level. Of 1,019 female candidates in the 2023 elections, only 48 were elected; a 4.7 percent success rate (Daily Trust, 2023). Although more women than men completed voter registration, the conversion from participation to representation remained negligible: out of 15,307 total candidates, only 1,550 were women (Opara, 2023).

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2026), Nigeria ranks 174 out of 190 countries in women's representation in the parliament, with only 4.2 percent (15 of 356) of seats held by women in the lower house and 4.7 percent (4 of 107) in the upper chamber. These figures pale in comparison to the global average of 27.3 percent and 28.2 percent, respectively. This is also worrisome when compared to the Sub-Saharan Africa average of 26.7 and 27.3 percent, respectively, and other African countries such as Rwanda where women occupy 63.8 percent seats in the lower house and 46.2 percent in the upper chamber, and South Africa (45.2 and 38.9 percent respectively), Namibia (42.3 and 16.7 percent), and Burundi (39.6 and 46.2 percent) (IPU, 2026). Such persistently low representation, despite Nigeria's ratification of the National Gender Policy and the 35 percent Affirmative Action in 2006 (Okoronkwo-Chukwu, 2013), raises critical questions, which forms the focal point of this study.

## **A Review of the Literature**

A strong female presence in parliament erodes entrenched stereotypes about women's leadership capacity, shape's public opinion and policy priorities, and diversifies legislative agendas to be more inclusive and responsive (O'Brien and Piscopo, 2018). Beyond its symbolic value, the participation of women in decision-making institutions generates psychological and social effects that empower other women to engage in politics. Con-

sequently, the literature on women and politics has given sustained attention to women's parliamentary representation. However, two broad lines of argument emerge: one emphasizing notable progress globally and in parts of Africa, and another underscoring the persistent gender gaps and systemic barriers that render women's inclusion in parliaments tenuous.

From the optimistic perspective, there has been undeniable progress in the numerical representation of women in national legislatures since the mid-twentieth century. At the end of the Second World War, women occupied only about 3 percent of parliamentary seats globally. This figure rose to 11.3 percent in 1995 and reached 23.4 percent by 2017 (IPU, 2017; O'Brien and Piscopo, 2018). According to IPU's (2020) report, women's representation increased from 11.3 percent in 1995 to 22.1 percent in 2015 and almost 25 percent in 2020. This steady progression, though uneven, reflects a significant historical shift in gender representation within political institutions. Countries such as Rwanda, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Andorra, Bolivia, Mexico, Belgium, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, and the Nordic states have become exemplars in women's legislative inclusion (IPU, 2020). In particular, the Nordic countries maintain some of the highest female parliamentary ratios globally, often exceeding 40 percent. The UAE's leap to 50 percent female representation in its Federal National Council following a presidential decree in 2019 illustrates the transformative impact of political will. Likewise, Mexico and Bolivia achieved gender parity through constitutional reforms and the adoption of zipper quota systems requiring alternating male and female candidates on party lists (International IDEA, 2022).

In Africa, the progress has been equally striking, albeit with regional variation. While African women were historically 'latecomers to national legislatures' (Yoon, 2011), they are increasingly asserting their presence and reshaping the political space (Bauer, 2012). Since the early 1990s, Africa has recorded one of the most dramatic increases in female representation globally (Adams, Scherpereel & Jacob, 2016). The African Union's Pan-Af-

rican Parliament has itself set a precedent by achieving gender parity through a 50–50 quota (Adams *et al.*, 2016). Namibia and South Africa’s adoption of voluntary party quotas has yielded representation levels of 46.2 percent and 42.4 percent, respectively (SADC, 2022), placing them among the top performers worldwide. Rwanda’s record is unparalleled: women constitute 61.3 percent of the Chamber of Deputies and 37.4 percent of the Senate, giving it the distinction of the only country in the world with a female-majority parliament (Singh, 2023). In Senegal, 41.8 percent of MPs are women, the third-highest figure in Africa and seventh globally (International IDEA, 2022).

Similarly, Mozambique, Uganda, and Tanzania have consistently maintained over 35 percent female representation since the early 2000s through a combination of reserved seats and proportional representation systems. These trends underscore the positive impact of institutional design, particularly quota adoption and proportional electoral systems, on enhancing women’s parliamentary access. Egypt also provides a case of notable progress. Following the 2011 Arab Spring, constitutional reforms reserved 25 parliamentary seats for women, increasing female representation to 28 percent in the lower house and 14 percent in the Senate. This achievement positions Egypt second only to the UAE in the Arab region, marking a sharp departure from its historical exclusion of women in politics (Tawfik, 2021). Such developments demonstrate how revolutionary or transitional moments can catalyze gender reforms in entrenched political systems.

Despite these encouraging patterns, data from the IPU shows women’s representation has improved only marginally, with men still dominating legislative seats worldwide (IPU, 2026). In most countries, female representation remains low. This gap underscores those institutional innovations alone cannot dismantle the deep-seated socio-political barriers that restrict women’s political advancement. In Africa, the male dominance in legislative chambers remains striking. The African Union’s ambitious 50 percent gender parity target, to be achieved by 2015 as part of Agen-

da 2063, remains unmet (Yoon, 2011). The UNECA (2019) report identifies only nine African countries, Rwanda, Namibia, South Africa, Senegal, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Burundi, and Uganda, where women hold more than one-third of parliamentary seats. This means that only 16 percent of African states have met or surpassed the 33 percent benchmark, while the overwhelming majority (84 percent) continue to fall short. Despite the introduction of gender quotas, women’s representation has stagnated (Bauer and Burnet, 2013). They further argue that a democratic state is not necessarily more likely to adopt gender quotas or have more women in parliament than a less democratic one. Instead, structural, cultural, and institutional factors often outweigh regime type in determining women’s political inclusion.

Among the institutional determinants, electoral systems emerge as particularly decisive. Empirical research shows that proportional representation (PR) systems are more conducive to women’s inclusion than majoritarian systems (Lindberg, 2004; Laserud and Taphorn, 2007). In PR systems, parties have greater incentives to present balanced candidate lists to appeal to broader constituencies, and the multi-member district structure increases women’s electability. In contrast, single-member district (SMD) systems, like Nigeria’s, tend to entrench incumbency advantages and gatekeeping behaviors that favor male candidates. Lindberg’s (2004) analysis of African elections confirms that majoritarian systems consistently produce lower female representation, making electoral reform a crucial lever for gender equality in political institutions. Party structures also serve as gatekeeping mechanisms that mediate access to political office (Kandawasvika-Nhundu, 2021). Patriarchal party hierarchies, financial barriers, and gendered nomination practices marginalize female aspirants long before electoral contests begin. Even when women enter parliament, they often face exclusion from key committees or leadership positions, limiting their substantive influence.

## The Nigerian Context: Persistent Decline Amid Affirmative Commitments

Nigeria presents one of the most striking cases of stagnation in women’s parliamentary representation despite constitutional democracy since 1999 (see Table 1). Despite women constituting nearly half of registered voters – 39.6 million (47.14%) of 84 million in 2019 – the proportion of female candidates was just 12.9 percent (Yiaga, 2020).

Table 1: Women’s representation in Nigerian Political Offices, 1999–2023

Officea	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015	2019	2023
President (Seats/Women)	1 / 0	1 / 0	1 / 0	1 / 0	1 / 0	1 / 0	1 / 0
Vice President (Seats/Women)	1 / 0	1 / 0	1 / 0	1 / 0	1 / 0	1 / 0	1 / 0
Senate (% Women)	2.8%	2.8%	8.3%	6.4%	7.3%	6.4%	2.8%
House of Representatives (% Women)	3.3%	5.8%	7.2%	7.2%	4.7%	3.1%	3.9%
Governor (Seats/Women)	36 / 0	36 / 0	36 / 0	36 / 0	36 / 0	36 / 0	31 / 0
Deputy Governor (% Women)	2.8%	5.6%	16.7%	2.8%	11.1%	8.3%	22.6%
State House of Assembly (% Women)	1.21%	3.8%	5.3%	6.3%	2.6%	4.5%	4.8%

Source: Authors’ compilation from dailies

The failure to implement the 35 percent Affirmative Action in Nigeria’s 2006 National Gender Policy further compounds this decline. Though the policy stipulated that 35 percent of all appointive and elective positions be reserved for women, it has primarily remained a rhetorical commitment without enforcement mechanisms (Okoronkwo-Chukwu, 2013).

Scholars identify determinants of women’s underrepresentation. Tremblay (2007) groups them into cultural, socioeconomic, and political factors; Kunovich and Paxton (2005) highlight socio-struc-

tural, political, and ideological dimensions; and Ruedin (2012) emphasizes institutional and cultural contexts. Stockemer (2011) adds two critical variables – degree of democracy and level of corruption – which together shape women’s access to power. In Nigeria, these factors are particularly salient. Deeply patriarchal norms confine women to domestic roles, limiting their political ambition and access to party networks. High campaign costs and weak intra-party democracy further disadvantage female aspirants in primary elections. Kandawasvika-Nhundu (2021) and Tripp (2003) argue that without addressing the patriarchal composition of political parties, the ‘gatekeepers of democracy’, affirmative action alone cannot yield sustainable gains. Nigerian parties remain male-dominated at the leadership level, with nomination fees, patronage networks, and violence in party primaries discouraging women’s participation. Despite forming a large bloc of campaign mobilizers and voters, women remain marginalized in candidate selection, underscoring the disjuncture between electoral participation and representational outcomes.

A strand of feminist scholarship urges a shift from focusing merely on numerical or symbolic representation to examining the substantive impact of women legislators (Ballington & Karam, 2010; Bauer, 2012). The argument is that what matters most is not how many women occupy seats but what difference their presence makes in policy-making and advocacy for women’s rights. Yet, this argument can underestimate the political arithmetic of legislative power. As the Nigerian experience illustrates, legislative influence is contingent on numbers; bills promoting gender equality require majority support to pass. Without adequate female representation, such support is structurally limited. Numbers, therefore, remain an indispensable condition for effective substantive representation. The literature also points to regional disparities in women’s political inclusion across Africa. East and Southern Africa have generally performed better than West and Central Africa, due mainly to

their adoption of proportional systems and quota mechanisms (Bauer, 2008; Adams *et al.*, 2016). However, as Adams, Scherpereel, and Jacob (2016) caution, focusing exclusively on parliamentary representation risks overlooking other forms of political inclusion. For instance, Ghana, despite having a low number of parliamentary seats, has higher female representation in cabinet positions. This observation broadens the analytical lens to recognize that representation is multi-layered, encompassing elective and appointive dimensions. Nevertheless, because legislatures are directly elected and wield significant policy-making authority, they remain the most critical arena for assessing democratic inclusivity.

Taken together, the literature reveals a paradox. While global and regional trends suggest significant progress in women's legislative inclusion, these gains remain fragile, uneven, and context-dependent. Structural and institutional variables, especially electoral systems, party politics, and affirmative action frameworks, interact with cultural and economic barriers to shape women's political outcomes. In Nigeria, the persistence of male-dominated party structures, the absence of quota enforcement, and a majoritarian electoral system have combined to constrain women's advancement. Moreover, the symbolic presence of women in politics has not translated into substantive empowerment or gender-responsive policy-making. The persistent underrepresentation of women in Nigeria's parliament, despite their numerical strength among voters, underscores a systemic democratic deficit. As feminist institutionalists contend, without deliberate institutional redesign, through gender quotas, financial support mechanisms, and inclusive party reforms, the pattern of exclusion is likely to endure.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the supply and demand model of candidate selection, a dominant framework in the literature explaining gender disparities in legislative representation (Lovenduski, 2016). The model posits that women's underrepresentation results from the interaction between two dimen-

sions: the supply of qualified and willing female candidates, and the demand for such candidates by political gatekeepers and voters. In other words, representation outcomes are shaped both by women's capacity and motivation to enter politics, and by the structural or cultural openness of political systems to accept them once they do.

According to Lovenduski (2016) and later expanded by Kunovich and Paxton (2005), gender gaps in representation cannot be fully explained by institutional design or electoral systems alone; they are equally contingent on the behavioral patterns and incentives governing recruitment and selection. Krook (2010a) conceptualizes this process as a four-stage chain: (1) the broad pool of citizens eligible to run for office, (2) those who actually aspire to do so, (3) the smaller group nominated by political parties, and (4) the final subset elected into office. While stages (1) and (2) represent the supply side, shaped by individual ambition and enabling conditions, stages (3) and (4) represent demand, determined by parties and electorates.

Krook (2010b) observes that globally, legislatures are dominated by more affluent than less well-off, more men than women, more middle-aged than young, and more white-collar than blue-collar professionals. This skew reveals how both supply and demand mechanisms are filtered through class, gender, and professional hierarchies. In the Nigerian context, where clientelist networks and male-dominated party structures heavily mediate political recruitment, this theoretical lens provides an instructive framework for understanding persistent gender disparities despite democratization.

The supply side focuses on factors that affect women's decision and capacity to participate as candidates. Empirical studies highlight structural variables such as education, affluence, professional exposure, political experience, and social capital (Kunovich & Paxton, 2005; Krook, 2010a). Lovenduski (2016) consolidates these into two broad determinants: resources (time, money, and experience) and motivation (ambition, interest, and political drive). Their argument implies that

unequal access to these resources leads to unequal political participation. Building on this foundation, Wauters *et al.* (2025) empirically validate the ‘ambition gap,’ finding that women are generally less likely to run for office than men due to lower political self-efficacy and inaccurate perceptions of electoral viability. Yet, more recent scholarship complicates this narrative. Clayton, O’Brien, and Piscopo (2023) observe a growing trend of reactive political ambition among women, spurred by exclusionary policies and the adverse impacts of male-dominated governance. In many Western democracies, women’s mobilization has therefore been motivated less by innate disinterest than by the recognition that exclusion from political institutions perpetuates gendered policy outcomes.

The demand side centers on the receptiveness of political systems and electorates to female candidates. Two levels of demand are critical: the institutional demand determined by political gatekeepers, party elites, godfathers, and selection committees, and the societal demand expressed by the voting public. Krook (2010b) underscores that candidate selection is not an objective assessment of competence but a subjective process shaped by elite preferences, norms, and cultural biases. Party leaders often assess aspirants not only on ability and experience but on perceived “electability,” an assessment deeply gendered in patriarchal contexts. In Nigeria, candidate nomination is controlled by party executives and godfathers who wield enormous discretion, often guided by personal loyalty, financial contribution, and regional patronage rather than merit or inclusion. Since these decision-makers are overwhelmingly male, they tend to reproduce gendered hierarchies that favor men as the “safer” or “more viable” choice.

The supply and demand model thus captures the dual structural and cultural dynamics that sustain women’s underrepresentation in Nigeria’s parliament. On the supply side, women are constrained by low access to education, financial insecurity, and limited networks within male-dominated political parties. On the demand side, party gate-

keepers and electorates operate within a patriarchal schema that questions women’s competence and legitimacy as leaders.

However, while the model provides a powerful diagnostic lens, it also has contextual limitations. Lovenduski (2016) developed it within stable party democracies characterized by institutional transparency and ideological competition. Nigeria’s political system, by contrast, operates within a hybrid structure of formal democracy and informal patronage. Candidate selection is frequently mediated by godfatherism, monetary inducement, and ethnic balancing, factors that extend beyond the original scope of the model. Consequently, while the supply and demand framework illuminate the mechanics of exclusion, it must be supplemented by theories of patron-client networks and informal institutionalism to capture the full extent of gender bias in Nigeria’s political recruitment. Furthermore, unlike in consolidated democracies where quotas or party-level affirmative action have helped offset supply deficits, Nigeria’s electoral system lacks enforceable mechanisms for gender inclusion. Legislative proposals to introduce reserved seats or quotas have repeatedly failed in the National Assembly, reinforcing a cycle where low supply and weak demand mutually reinforce each other.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the structural and socio-political factors underlying the persistent underrepresentation of women in Nigeria’s national parliament, with a focus on the 2023 general elections. The study relies on secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, reports, and credible institutional sources such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), UN Women, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Searches were conducted through academic databases (Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar) and policy repositories using keywords such as women’s representation in Nigeria, gender and elections, candidate selection, and affirmative action. Only materi-

als with contextual relevance were included in the study. Sources were screened for credibility, empirical grounding, and thematic relevance to women's representation, while unverifiable online content and non-empirical commentaries were excluded. In total, 42 documents met the inclusion criteria and were systematically reviewed, comprising 26 peer-reviewed journal articles, 8 policy reports, and 8 institutional publications. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The process involved coding, categorizing, and synthesizing recurrent ideas into key themes which were interpreted within the supply-demand framework. Triangulation across multiple document types, such as academic, governmental, and international, enhanced analytical credibility and reduced bias.

## Discussion

### Nigeria's 2023 Elections and the Decline of Women in Parliament

In the lead-up to Nigeria's 2023 general elections, the problem of candidate supply once again came to the fore. Out of 15,725 aspirants who expressed interest in contesting for presidential, gubernatorial, and legislative offices, 13,725 were men, and only 1,544 were women. After the primaries, 4,223 candidates emerged as party flagbearers, but just 381 were women (Nkereuwem, 2023). In five of the 36 states, no woman contested for the Senate. Ultimately, only four women were elected to the Senate and eleven to the House of Representatives – a decline from the 9th Assembly, which had seven female Senators and eleven female Representatives. The broader trajectory shows an even sharper regression: women held 36 seats in 2007, 32 in 2011, 22 in 2015, 11 in 2019, and 17 in 2023. These statistics raise pertinent questions about how candidates emerge, what political platforms women contest from, and the strength of incumbency and party structures that enable or constrain women's success.

### Candidate Selection and Recruitment

Candidate recruitment operates on the supply side of political representation. In Nigeria, the law

recognizes party primaries as the only legitimate process for selecting flagbearers, and the performance of political parties at the polls often mirrors the integrity of their primaries (Otaru, 2022). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) mandates that all eligible party members be given equal opportunity to participate in primaries. At the same time, Section 82 of the Electoral Act 2022 stipulates that these elections must be open, transparent, and supervised by INEC officials (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2022). The courts have repeatedly nullified electoral outcomes that violated these provisions. Yet, the formal legality of primaries contrasts sharply with their practical execution. In reality, the process is dominated by internal party factions, patronage networks, and elite capture. Nigerian political parties are riddled with internal rivalries, imposition of candidates, and a pervasive 'godfatherism' culture, whereby a small group of male elites determines who receives party tickets (Adeleke, 2018).

Ette and Akpan-Obong (2023) highlight how patronage, winner-takes-all politics, and cultural bias obstruct women's entry into the race. Women often face exclusionary pre-primary arrangements, where endorsement from male powerbrokers is a prerequisite for nomination. Thus, party primaries frequently serve as mere ratifications of elite selections rather than genuine democratic contests. As Aisosa Amadasun, the former State Organizing Secretary of the APC in Edo State, observes, the primaries conducted so far by the leadership of the APC across the 36 states are shameful, disgraceful, undemocratic... Any party that fails to recognize the inputs of women and reward them commensurately is doomed to defeat (Ojoye, 2018).

Similarly, at the 5th Women and Girls Summit in Abuja, Sonaiya lamented that many women who had won primaries were later coerced to step down. In contrast, others were prevented from contesting altogether or faced intimidation and imposition of male candidates (Ojoye, 2018). Such experiences illustrate that primaries are often arenas of gendered exclusion, violence, and manipulation; factors that systematically sup-

press women's supply as candidates. Meanwhile, comparable dynamics exist across Africa. In Ghana, women are marginalized through exorbitant nomination fees, internal violence, and a "politics of insults" that delegitimizes female aspirants (Bauer, 2017; Bauer & Darkwah, 2021).

This pattern reflects what Crowder-Meyer (2013) identifies as the gendered nature of recruitment networks: the more insular and male-dominated the party's internal networks, the fewer women are recruited. Parties with broader, cross-sectoral recruitment bases tend to produce more female candidates. In Nigeria, where informal power networks and godfather structures dominate recruitment, women are systematically excluded. This entrenched imbalance on the supply side helps explain why women's representation in parliament continues to stagnate, and, in 2023, even regresses, despite decades of advocacy and reform efforts.

### **Political Platforms, Gatekeeping, and Structural Control**

The absence of independent candidacy in Nigeria means that all aspirants must contest through political parties, making party platforms the primary gatekeepers of political access. While Nigeria has over fifty registered political parties, two, i.e., the All-Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), remain dominant. In the 2023 elections, two newer entrants, the Labor Party (LP) and the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP), emerged as competitive actors, capturing significant portions of the vote and several parliamentary seats. Yet, the APC and PDP continue to wield disproportionate control due to their extensive national reach and entrenched organizational machinery. Political structures in Nigeria can be understood in both objective and subjective terms. Objectively, they refer to the party's territorial spread and capacity to maintain executives from the ward to the national level. Subjectively, however, structure denotes the ability to "oil" these networks - sustaining loyalty and mobilization through patronage, personal ties, and informal transactions.

For women, who are often excluded from the networks of patronage and financial flows that underpin political organization, sustaining such structures independently is nearly impossible. Consequently, the primaries of dominant parties like the APC and PDP, where access to power is most meaningful, are prohibitively competitive, resource-intensive, and exclusionary. Women who cannot penetrate these networks often resort to smaller parties, where winning prospects are slim due to limited visibility, funding, and reach.

Gatekeeping thus operates on both the supply and demand sides of candidate emergence. On the demand side, party leaders rarely recruit women because they perceive electoral politics as violent and conflict-prone - an environment deemed unsuitable for women. On the supply side, many women self-exclude due to the toxic and insecure nature of Nigeria's political space. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion, where women are neither actively sought by parties nor adequately supported to compete. This pattern is not unique to Nigeria. In Zimbabwe, entrenched patriarchal structures have confined women to peripheral political roles, despite their numerical dominance as voters (Matiashe, 2023). In Malawi, Kayuni and Chikadza's (2016) field study across Mangochi, Chiradzulu, and Phalombe districts found that party leaders such as principal gatekeepers routinely bypassed women for elective positions, deeming them "unelectable." Similarly, in Kenya, men's control over political structures and access to state resources has reinforced their dominance in electoral contests, leaving women at the margins (Kivoi, 2014).

In contrast, Rwanda demonstrates how deliberate structural inclusion can transform outcomes. Through institutional reforms that embedded women into political party structures and electoral lists, Rwanda now boasts the world's highest proportion of female parliamentarians (Singh, 2023). This underscores the decisive role of political gatekeeping and institutional design in shaping women's representation. However, the literature widely acknowledges political parties as the most consequential gatekeepers in modern democra-

cies (Miettinen & Poutvaara, 2015). They mediate between state institutions and citizens, determining who gets nominated and, by extension, who gets elected. As Ashe (2020) argues in the Canadian context, parties are not merely conduits of democracy but filters of inclusion and exclusion, often perpetuating gender and social inequalities. In Nigeria, where party control is highly centralized, and informal networks wield more power than formal rules, this gatekeeping function entrenches male dominance and sustains the structural barriers that continue to marginalize women from political competition.

## Female Incumbency and the Politics of Continuity

The incumbency factor operates at both the supply and demand sides of women's political representation and remains a decisive, though unevenly distributed, force in Nigerian elections. As Gordon and Landa (2009) note, incumbency advantage is a universal feature of democratic politics; however, in developing democracies, it frequently translates into a tool for electoral manipulation and elite perpetuation rather than a safeguard of continuity. In advanced democracies, institutional checks, transparent election management, and rule-based governance mitigate the abuse of power. Conversely, in much of Africa, incumbency often distorts competition through control of state resources, rulemaking, and adjudication processes. Nigerian incumbents exploit these mechanisms by influencing electoral law, appointments to election management bodies, and judicial decisions in electoral tribunals (Nwanegbo & Alumona, 2011).

Meanwhile, the incumbency advantage is not gender-neutral. Across Africa, women incumbents rarely enjoy the structural or political privileges of their male counterparts. The 2014 Malawian general election illustrates this asymmetry. Female representation in parliament fell from 22.3% to 16.7%, partly due to what Chikapa (2016) describes as the 'Banda Effect.' The unpopularity of President Joyce Banda – Malawi's first female head of state – triggered a gendered backlash, as

voters, including women, punished female candidates collectively for her perceived governance failures. The episode demonstrates how incumbency can produce reverse outcomes for women when leadership performance is filtered through sexist narratives that question women's competence in governance.

A similar dynamic plays out in Nigeria, where incumbency advantage rarely accrues to female legislators. In the 2023 National Assembly elections, none of the female senators in the Ninth Assembly secured re-election, while seven of the thirteen female members of the House of Representatives lost their seats (Punch, 2023). This outcome underscores both institutional and cultural resistance to women's political continuity. Party leaders who are predominantly male serve as primary arbiters of re-nomination, and women seldom control the internal levers of party decision-making. Consequently, even female legislators often lose nominations to male challengers endorsed by party elites. Those who attempt to resist such displacement must navigate a political culture characterized by patronage, intimidation, and, at times, violence; conditions that disproportionately disadvantage women who are less likely to engage in coercive tactics or financial inducements to secure party tickets.

Incumbency, therefore, functions as a gendered mechanism of political continuity: a source of advantage for men and vulnerability for women. Its operation in Nigeria reflects broader patriarchal control within political parties and weak institutional safeguards that allow party leaders to override meritocratic criteria. The result is a structural pattern in which women's incumbency offers no guarantee of retention but instead exposes them to intensified intra-party gatekeeping and societal skepticism.

## The Role of the Electoral System

The electoral system operates primarily on the supply side of women's political representation and remains a major structural impediment in Nigeria. The country practices a First-Past-the-Post

(FPTP) or Single-Member District (SMD) electoral system, where the candidate with the highest number of votes wins. This winner-takes-all arrangement fosters zero-sum competition and discourages inclusive participation. In such cut-throat contests, women, who already face financial, cultural, and institutional barriers, are particularly disadvantaged. The highly competitive nature of SMD elections often incentivizes political violence, vote buying, and patronage, practices that disproportionately exclude female aspirants. Moreover, Nigeria's electoral umpire has historically lacked independence, often aligning with the ruling government's interests (Nwagwu, 2022). This perception of bias weakens women's confidence in the system and reduces their willingness to invest in electoral competition.

In contrast, proportional representation (PR) systems have consistently proven more favorable to women's political inclusion (Matland and Studlar, 1996). PR systems allow parties to present candidate lists, which can be structured to promote gender balance. Rwanda's experience exemplifies this dynamic, where the adoption of PR mechanisms and gender quotas has enabled women to attain a majority in parliament (Nihiru, 2022). Thus, the structural logic of Nigeria's SMD system, rather than merely cultural or individual factors, significantly constrains women's representation and reinforces existing gender asymmetries in access to power.

## **Financial Constraints and Access to Resources**

Financial constraints constitute another critical supply-side barrier to women's political participation in Nigeria. Political competition in the country is capital-intensive, encompassing exorbitant nomination fees, campaign logistics, media visibility, and patronage networks. Women, who are generally excluded from lucrative economic networks and control of resources, face acute challenges in meeting these financial demands. As studies show, political campaigns in Nigeria require not only substantial personal funding but also the capacity to distribute inducements

and maintain loyal structures, both of which favor wealthy male aspirants (Daily Trust, 2023; Nkereuwem, 2023; Opara, 2023; Olurode, 2013).

This monetization of politics compounds existing gender inequalities by restricting access to party primaries, where nomination often goes to the highest bidder. The high cost of participation thus entrenches a male-dominated political elite and deters capable women from contesting. The pattern is not unique to Nigeria; in Zambia, for example, parliamentary contests are dominated by elderly businessmen with extensive financial means, reflecting how patriarchal and materialist logics intersect in African political recruitment (Wahman, 2023). The implication is that financial exclusion is not merely an individual constraint but a structural determinant that perpetuates women's marginalization within Nigeria's electoral process.

## **Cultural Perceptions and Biases**

Cultural perceptions and gender biases operate predominantly on the demand side of women's political exclusion in Nigeria. The entrenched belief that women are unfit to lead men is deeply rooted in traditional norms, which have been transposed into the political space of the modern state. This cultural inheritance, sustained through patriarchy, religion, and socialization, constructs leadership as a male preserve, thereby marginalizing women who aspire to public office. As Daily Trust (2023) observes, this traditional construct is so ingrained that women in politics are often stigmatized as promiscuous, morally wayward, or lacking domestic control, particularly if their husbands are perceived as subordinate or absent. Such perceptions reproduce a symbolic "glass ceiling" that only a few women have been able to break. Meanwhile, religious institutions reinforce these barriers by prescribing limited public roles for women. In Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR), the ideal woman is often portrayed as obedient, nurturing, and apolitical (Oloyede, 2016).

These religious-cultural expectations constrain women's mobility and agency, translating into skepticism toward female leadership in both ru-

ral and urban constituencies. As Nwangwu *et al.* (2022) notes, misogyny and patriarchy combine in a culture where women and girls are objectified and meant to be looked after, making it additionally difficult for women to contest and win elections without the cover, or endorsement, of a strong man. This dependency dynamic ensures that female politicians are often appraised through their association with influential male figures rather than their competence or policy ideas.

Cultural expectations of women as homemakers and caregivers further limit their capacity to engage in politics. The heavy domestic burden and the valorization of fertility, where a woman's status is measured by the number of children she bears, delay or obstruct political ambitions. These structural expectations not only consume women's time and resources but also shape societal attitudes that delegitimize politically active women. Moreover, gender-biased media representation compounds the problem by reinforcing stereotypes of female weakness or incompetence while underreporting women's achievements (Daily Trust, 2023; Oloyede, 2016; Olurode, 2013). In effect, cultural and religious perceptions act as powerful demand-side filters, shaping voter behavior and party calculations. They perpetuate the notion that political leadership is a male domain, thereby undermining the legitimacy and electability of women candidates despite constitutional guarantees of equality.

## Violence and Harassment

Political violence constitutes a significant deterrent to women's participation in electoral contests in Nigeria and thus represents a supply-side constraint in women's representation. Acts of violence against women in politics, such as physical assault and psychological intimidation, as well as sexual harassment and symbolic exclusion, have become pervasive, prompting the United Nations General Assembly to adopt its 2011 Zero Tolerance Resolution on gender-based political violence (Krook, 2017). Such violence not only endangers women's physical safety but also undermines their political agency, discouraging potential aspirants from contesting elections.

Krook (2017) categorizes violence against women in politics into five overlapping forms: physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and symbolic. Physical violence involves acts such as beating, abduction, or assassination. Sexual violence encompasses harassment, coercion, and sexist commentary, often used to humiliate or control female aspirants. Psychological violence manifests through intimidation, stalking, or threats designed to cause emotional trauma. Economic violence includes the withdrawal of financial support and exclusion from economic opportunities critical to campaign viability. Symbolic violence, on the other hand, delegitimizes women through rhetoric and representation that portray them as unqualified or incompetent solely because of their gender.

In Nigeria, all five forms are present and frequently intersect. Notable cases include the brutal killing of Salome Abuh, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) Women Leader, who was burnt alive in her home at Ochadamu, Kogi State, during the 2019 gubernatorial elections (Premium Times, 2019). In February 2023, Victoria Chimex, the Labor Party Women Leader in Kaura Local Government Area of Kaduna State, was assassinated by unknown gunmen (Enyiocha, 2022). Earlier cases include the killing of Janet Olapade of the PDP in 2002 in Ondo State, Joyce Fatai, the former Nasarawa State Commissioner for Women Affairs in 2003, and Emily Aborishade of the Alliance for Democracy in Ekiti State, who was attacked with acid in December 2012 (Adeleke, 2018).

Sexual harassment constitutes another pervasive but underreported form of political violence. Female aspirants such as Okunola Abiola and Ndi Kato have publicly recounted experiences of coercion and sexual solicitation as preconditions for political support or candidacy endorsements (Abang, 2019). Reporting such incidents often leads to further exclusion from political networks, revealing the deeply entrenched culture of silence surrounding gender-based abuse. Ultimately, the prevalence of violence and harassment discourages women's political participation and reinforces patriarchal control of Nigeria's political arena.

By elevating risk, amplifying stigma, and limiting access, violence functions as both a barrier to entry and a mechanism of exclusion, systematically eroding the supply of women in electoral politics.

## **Physical and Material Constraints**

Women in Nigerian politics confront multiple physical and material constraints that significantly limit their competitiveness in electoral contests. Physical constraints relate to the aggressive and often violent nature of Nigeria's political landscape, which deters women from contesting or engaging fully in campaign activities (Olurode, 2013). The normalization of intimidation, thuggery, and coercion during party primaries and general elections disproportionately affects female aspirants, who are less likely to engage in or withstand such hostility. Material constraints compound these barriers. Financial exclusion, unemployment, and limited access to education undermine women's ability to compete on equal footing with men. The prohibitive cost of nomination forms, campaign logistics, and post-election litigation effectively sidelines women who lack economic backing (Nkereuwem, 2023). This challenge is not unique to Nigeria. In Zambia's 2021 parliamentary elections, the average campaign cost was approximately 568,000 ZMW (USD 31,300), while candidates winning over 20 percent of votes spent an average of 990,000 ZMW (USD 54,500) – amounts far beyond what most women can afford (Wahman, 2023). The intersection of financial precarity and institutional exclusion perpetuates a political culture dominated by wealthy male elites, thereby constraining women's participation at every stage of the electoral process.

## **Patriarchy, Stigmatization, and Limited Access to Education**

Patriarchy remains deeply embedded in Nigeria's sociopolitical fabric and functions as a demand-side barrier that constrains both voter acceptance and party support for women candidates. Traditional beliefs that cast leadership as a masculine domain translate into persistent electoral discrimination against women (Oloyede,

2016; Olurode, 2013). Female aspirants are frequently stigmatized as socially deviant, morally suspect, or lacking in domestic virtue, leading to marginalization within male-dominated party structures. Educational inequalities reinforce these prejudices. Many Nigerian women have limited access to quality education and political mentorship, resulting in lower formal qualifications and fewer leadership credentials (Oloyede, 2016). Consequently, even when women overcome institutional and financial obstacles, they often struggle to command public confidence or institutional legitimacy.

## **Societal and Structural Barriers**

Beyond individual constraints, broader societal and structural barriers also curtail women's political participation. Restricted access to networks of patronage and clientelist support prevents women from integrating into the informal systems that sustain political advancement (Isaksson *et al.*, 2014). Gender norms perpetuate perceptions of women as apolitical, while the persistent threat of electoral violence further discourages women from contesting or even voting. Research demonstrates that non-policy factors, such as family background, spousal support, and even media scrutiny of appearance, shape women's political trajectories (Rombough & Keithly, 2010). In Zambia, as Paakinen (2020) observes, women's growing political engagement remains constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms and unequal resource distribution, limiting their ability to secure parliamentary representation. These dynamics mirror the Nigerian experience, where structural inequalities continue to undermine women's substantive inclusion in democratic governance.

## **Absence of Quota System and Affirmative Action on Paper**

The quota system remains one of the most practical mechanisms for addressing the persistent underrepresentation of women in political institutions across the developing world (O'Brien & Rickne, 2014). It operates as a supply-inducing reform by motivating more women to contest elective of-

fices. In Africa, quotas have been instrumental in the rapid rise of female parliamentarians (Bauer, 2021). Notably, 27 of 49 sub-Saharan African countries have adopted formal provisions for women's inclusion through reserved seats, legislated candidate quotas, or party quotas (Adams, Scherpereel, & Jacob, 2016). Nigeria stands out as an exception. There is no law specifying a minimum number of seats for women in its legislature, forcing women to compete directly with men in a system structurally tilted in favor of the latter. This institutional vacuum has contributed to Nigeria's chronically low female representation across elective positions. In contrast, neighboring Niger Republic has demonstrated the positive impact of quota laws: women's representation in its parliament rose from 1.2% in 1999 to 12.4% in 2004 following the enactment of a gender quota (Kang, 2013).

Although the recent military coup has reversed some of these gains, the quota has been a significant catalyst for women's mobilization and institutional presence in Nigerian politics. Similar outcomes have been observed in Rwanda, South Africa, and Namibia, where the adoption of quota mechanisms substantially enhanced women's political inclusion. Empirical evidence, therefore, underscores that institutionalized quotas systematically expand women's access and competitiveness in political processes. Tamale (2000) cautions that affirmative action policies often benefit a narrow, educated elite among women, yet she acknowledges their instrumental role in advancing women's entry into politics. In Nigeria, however, affirmative action has remained largely rhetorical. Although the 35% Affirmative Action was adopted in 2016, it has never been operationalized. In 2020, nine civil society organizations filed a suit compelling the government to implement the policy, and in 2022, the Federal High Court ruled in their favor, directing that 35% of public appointments be reserved for women (Ejekwonyilo, 2022). Despite this judicial mandate, compliance has been nonexistent. This non-enforcement reflects both the entrenched patriarchy of Nigeria's political culture and the limited legislative leverage of women in parliament to advance gender-based reforms. Moreover, the near-total male dominance of the

executive branch perpetuates a lack of political will to implement the 35% Affirmative Action at both the federal and state levels.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The return of democracy in Nigeria in 1999 generated widespread optimism that groups historically excluded from governance, particularly women, would gain equitable access to the political space. Yet, more than two decades later, women's representation, especially within the legislature, remains remarkably low. This study has examined the multifaceted barriers responsible for this persistent underrepresentation. These include party gatekeeping practices, patriarchal norms, cultural and religious constraints, stigmatization, godfatherism, political violence, financial exclusion, and the absence of institutional mechanisms such as gender quotas or affirmative action. Collectively, these factors reinforce systemic bias and limit women's political advancement. However, these challenges are not uniquely Nigerian; they reflect a broader continental pattern of structural exclusion. Across Africa, women face similar institutional and socio-cultural barriers in accessing political office. Yet, as demonstrated by countries such as Rwanda, Namibia, and South Africa, transformative progress is possible when political will, institutional design, and gender-responsive leadership converge. In these contexts, the introduction of quota laws, proportional representation systems, and deliberate state-backed inclusion policies has dramatically increased women's presence in parliament.

Nigeria's position among the lowest-ranked African countries for women's parliamentary representation underscores the urgency of reform. Drawing from successful regional examples, Nigeria must institutionalize a legally enforceable gender quota, ideally reserving a minimum of 35 percent of legislative and appointive positions for women. Such a system would correct structural imbalance, ensure fairer nomination processes, and normalize women's visibility in political life. Beyond quotas, expanding women's access to education, especially in rural areas, through

scholarships, mentorships, and leadership development programs would strengthen the pipeline of qualified female candidates. Equally, improving access to financial resources, including micro-credit schemes and targeted fundraising mechanisms, would help women overcome one of the most persistent barriers to electoral participation.

In addition, political parties must also assume a central role in advancing gender equity. Institutionalizing internal party quotas for candidate selection, membership, and leadership positions would foster a more inclusive culture within the political system. Legal and institutional safeguards against political harassment and gender-based violence are also essential to ensure that women can participate safely and confidently in political processes.

Furthermore, effective policy making requires reliable, gender-disaggregated data to monitor progress and inform interventions. A national framework for data collection and reporting on women's political participation should be developed to support evidence-based planning and

track progress toward Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality.

Finally, creating an inclusive political environment demands a coordinated effort among government institutions, civil society organizations, political parties, and the broader society. Transformative change will depend on challenging deep-seated stereotypes, reforming exclusionary practices, and sustaining advocacy for gender equity as a democratic imperative. The experiences of Rwanda, Namibia, and South Africa demonstrate that women's political inclusion is achievable, not an aspirational ideal but a product of deliberate and sustained state action. For Nigeria, such action is not merely desirable; it is indispensable to achieving a representative democracy that reflects the voices and aspirations of all its citizens.

#### **Authors' contributions:**

**Nife Ogunbodede:** conceptualization, data curation, methodology, writing: initial and final drafts.

**Topo Shola Akinyetun:** data curation, analysis, writing: initial and final drafts.

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