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Gendered barriers and women electoral participation in Nigeria: implications for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5

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Abstract
Despite growing global advocacy for gender equality, women's electoral participation in Nigeria remains low, raising concerns about inclusive governance. This study examined the extent of women's participation in Nigerian politics, with particular attention to factors affecting the implementation of gender-responsive policies to address women's underrepresentation, through the lens of Intersectionality Theory. The study adopted a qualitative approach, relying on secondary sources such as online materials, books, journal articles, documentaries, and reports. A key finding of this study is that women remain significantly underrepresented in Nigerian politics, as evidenced by the relatively low elected women in the 2023 general elections. The study concluded that gendered barriers to women's electoral participation in Nigeria perpetuate a cycle of exclusion, thereby hindering the nation's progress toward gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Thus, the study recommends an expedited statutory recognition and strict enforcement of the 35% affirmative action policy to enhance women's political participation in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Fourth republic, Gender inequalities, Gender-responsive policy, Political participation, Policy design and implementation, SDGs 5, Women empowerment*

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INTRODUCTION

Women remain underrepresented in Nigeria's politics, even though equitable representation of all identity groups is fundamental to effective governance (Agboola & Alade, 2025). This situation is partly due to women having traditionally been treated unequally (Kelly, 2016). The available literature indicates that women are still marginalized in Nigeria (Onimisi, 2025). Young (2018) claims that "marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression". According to a recent special report by the Global Press Journal, among the 54 African countries, Nigeria still ranks last in women's representation in the lower legislative house (Ajakaiye, 2025). Hence, the underrepresentation of women in Nigerian electoral politics remains a major challenge, directly affecting the country's progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 5, which promotes gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (Eni et al., 2022). This persistent disparity in gender representation in Nigeria's politics is especially visible in legislative bodies, where the percentage of seats held by women remains critically low, underscoring ongoing male dominance in key political decision-making roles (Ogbonna et al., 2021). This deep-rooted gender gap not only reflects the systemic marginalization of women but also hinders the development of comprehensive policies that could benefit from diverse perspectives and experiences (Jatula & Adesanga, 2025).

Although reports indicate that women still have low participation in elective or political positions worldwide (Tambe & Jormfeldt, 2025; Zia, 2025), more than 130 countries have adopted electoral gender quotas that require a specific number of women to be elected as legislators and to be included as candidates (Zetterberg et al., 2022). In Africa, Rwanda has been at the forefront of promoting women's political participation by adopting various laws since 1995, including a constitutional provision for gender quotas in 2003 (Burnet, 2018). Similarly, to improve women's participation in politics, Nigeria has developed the National Gender Policy to address women's marginalization. The policy proposes a 35% affirmative action for women in all political appointment positions (Salaudeen & Jiddere, 2024). However, unlike some countries that adopted electoral gender quotas to address the underrepresentation of women in elective positions, Nigeria has yet to successfully implement this 35% affirmative action policy because it is not constitutionally binding on the government (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2022; Salaudeen & Jiddere, 2024). This is despite the prevalent underrepresentation of women in Nigerian politics, which is reportedly rooted in a complex interplay of socio-political factors, including patriarchal structures, economic disempowerment, and deeply ingrained cultural norms that collectively undermine women's political aspirations and participation (Jatula & Adesanga, 2025; Suleiman, 2017).

In addition, such factors as patriarchy and economic status collectively shape a political landscape in which women are often confined to specific portfolios, limiting their broader political aspirations and perpetuating gender inequality in the political sphere (Okunade et al., 2023). This situation is exacerbated by the tendency within Sub-Saharan African socio-political cultures, particularly in Nigeria, to socially exclude women from politics by framing them primarily through their sexuality rather than as individuals with fundamental human rights, including the right to political engagement (Ogbonna et al., 2021). Regardless of these barriers, Nigerian women possess significant electoral capacity, often outnumbering male voters. However, this strength has not translated into proportional political power due to a lack of competitive consciousness and to patriarchal leadership unwilling to concede gender justice (Aluko, 2011). Meanwhile,

efforts to achieve equal representation for women in Nigeria's democratic institutions remain germane to improving women's political participation (Zia, 2025).

Nigeria faces significant challenges in achieving gender equality, particularly in political and economic decision-making. Although the country has adopted various national gender policies alongside the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) in 2015, progress has remained constrained (Oweibia et al., 2024). Specifically, SDG 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by eliminating discrimination, ensuring access to healthcare, and promoting equal economic and political opportunities. However, the continuity of poor female representation in political offices indicates a gap between policy formulation and implementation. Existing frameworks have been weakened by inadequate enforcement mechanisms, patriarchal norms, and limited institutional commitment, thereby constraining their success. As described by Adike (2012), women's empowerment is necessary for building an equitable society; nonetheless, without deliberate and enforceable strategies, such empowerment remains a mirage. Hence, the need for a more critical evaluation of policy design and implementation strategies to address those barriers that continues to marginalize in Nigeria.

As Lwamba et al. (2022) aver, achieving a reasonable representation of women in both civil and political processes require inclusive, community-driven development approaches. Applying ideas from Weber and Grech (2025) shows that community-based inclusive development (CBID) does not merely advocate including women as members of a marginalized group within dominant paradigms and practices; rather, it promotes deliberate efforts to empower women, ensure their participation in decision-making processes, and provide access to sustainable and equitable development outcomes. Therefore, this study aims to examine the extent of women's participation in Nigerian politics, with particular interest in the factors affecting the implementation of gender-responsive policies to address women's underrepresentation. This study is anchored on the following research question:

in what ways has the implementation of existing gender-responsive policies failed to address the underrepresentation of women in Nigerian politics?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual clarification

i. Women empowerment

The theme of women's empowerment has been a central focus in modern global development literature. This idea was articulated at the first international women's conference in Nairobi in 1985. Subsequent academic work has produced numerous conceptualizations of women's empowerment, making it difficult to provide a generally accepted definition. Akomolafe (2006) defines women's empowerment as a cyclical process through which women acquire cognitive and bodily capabilities that help them negotiate their social milieus and, as a result, develop their social identities and economic statuses. Schmitz et al. (2019) also describe it as a process that expands women's jurisdiction over financial decisions that determine individual and social consequences. Hence, Mandal (2018) opines that the concept of women's empowerment involves the reallocation of social power and authority. This view underscores the value of empowerment in Nigeria's policies aimed at reducing poverty and promoting socioeconomic development.

Similarly, Danjuma et al. (2013) support the empowerment of women as a means to improve their socioeconomic status and suggest that this may be achieved by developing an economic culture that equips women with the technical knowledge needed to fill various positions, redirecting women toward diverse business opportunities, and offering them an escape route out of poverty traps. Existing relevant literature indicates that women in Nigeria have been affected by developmental disadvantages, characterized by systemic imbalances in the provision of opportunities, limited access to investable funds and technology, and non-participation in decision-making processes, among other issues (Akpomuvie, 2018).

According to Kabeer (2018), gender empowerment is a key factor in social change and therefore ought to be included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN Women, 2015), as it effectively enhances gender equality. Additionally, Okeke (2017) argued that it is necessary to empower, particularly rural and poor women, to drive economic development, favoring an inclusive empowerment model that incorporates social, financial, agricultural, health, and educational aspects. In the same vein, UN Women (2015) insisted that empowering women can increase women's contributions to the economy, improve living standards, and enhance their bargaining power within households. As a result, SDG 5 and SDG 8 were set to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, as they were seen as fundamental rights and as other developmental indicators. Moreover, when a country has gender-friendly policies, it helps build a diversified economy (Kazandjian et al., 2019).

ii. Sustainable Development

Development has been understood differently across fields, and there has been no clear-cut definition of the concept. In turn, a wide range of definitions and perspectives has infiltrated the social sciences and humanities. Essien and Essien (2018) define development as a progressive change in which a primitive condition is converted to a more complex, intricate, organized, and sophisticated one. Also, Rabie (2016) believes that development is an economic construct with a positive connotation and that definite technological and economic practices must be employed to use available resources to stimulate the economy. This author further explained that: “Development is a progressive process within the society that transforms less developed countries into economic growth; slow sociocultural and political development into dynamic development where there is the continuous economic growth, sociocultural and political change, and this assists in enhancing the standards of living of all the constituents.”

Sustainable development is a concept that has elicited a broad spectrum of views within academia, largely because it applies to contemporary society. The 1987 Brundtland Report marked the beginning of this concept. According to research, sustainable development is a fundamental concept in development studies, and the World Bank and other development organizations are guided by it (Rabie, 2016). In recent years, sustainable development has been operationalized through the United Nations’ SDGs; in this context, SDG 5 stresses gender equality and the full participation of women in decision-making processes. This affirms that inclusive governance and gender equity are pivotal to realizing sustainable development. Hence, the low representation of women in Nigerian politics poses a significant challenge to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Kimberle Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality in 1989 (Spitzer, 2023). The idea behind intersectionality as a theoretical framework is that human experience is shaped by multiple social positions, such as race and gender, and that, to understand it best, these positions should not be considered in isolation (Bauer et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that factors or entities treated separately in human experience may be interconnected. Based on this notion of intersectionality, such interconnectedness is found in the relationships among systems of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and citizenship spaces (Collins & Bilge, 2018).

In other words, intersectionality encompasses both the multiple dimensions of identity and their interactions (Al-Faham et al., 2019). Intersectionality serves as a robust theoretical and methodological tool in qualitative research, particularly regarding identity and marginalization (Bauer et al., 2021). As an analytical tool, intersectionality helps examine and address deep-rooted power relations that intersect to influence the lives of women, especially Black women (Haynes et al., 2020). Rather than treating inequality as a single-axis phenomenon, intersectionality explains how women's experiences of exclusion are shaped by the convergence of gender, class, ethnicity, and religion, revealing why certain groups of women face deeper structural disadvantages than others. In Nigerian politics, this perspective is particularly essential for understanding how gender intersects with socioeconomic and cultural factors to limit women's access to political participation and representation (Fidelis, 2025).

To apply this theory to women's marginalization and the challenge of low political participation in Nigeria, scholarly evidence shows that women have been underrepresented in political and elective offices due to an interplay of socioeconomic factors. Some of these factors include limited economic power, lack of access to education, religion, social status, and employment (Onimisi, 2025). Other factors that appear potentially relevant to the Nigerian situation include gender, age, and citizenship spaces (Collins & Bilge, 2018). Based on Udjoh's (2024) example, in which the author presented a story about the Anambra Governorship not being for girls, we see at least some interconnections among gender, patriarchy, and the citizenship space.

RESEARCH METHOD AND MATERIALS

The study adopted a qualitative approach and relied on secondary sources of data. These secondary sources of data included online materials, books, journal articles, documentaries, reports, and other relevant sources.

RESULT PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

One reason gender-responsive policies have failed to address the underrepresentation of women in Nigerian politics is the lack of political will to implement them (Ajakaiye, 2025). Similarly, the National Bureau of Statistics (2018) as cited in Ademeso and Ogundiran (2025) reported that, over two decades ago, Nigerian women lacked equal representation in decision-making processes, particularly in elective and appointive public offices, compared with their male counterparts, despite the country's transition to democracy in 1999. Eme et al. (2014) also argued

that women are underrepresented in Nigeria's electoral politics, which, by extension, translates into limited representation in decision-making.

Table 1 shows persistent and significant gender disparities in political representation in Nigeria across the 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023 electoral cycles. Women's representation in the Senate remained consistently low, rising marginally from 7 seats in 2011 to 8 in 2015 and 2019, then falling sharply to 4 in 2023 out of 109 seats. A similar pattern is evident in the House of Representatives, where female representation declined from 26 in 2011 to 22 in 2015, dropped significantly to 13 in 2019, and rose to 17 in 2023 out of 360 seats, indicating instability rather than sustained progress. At the executive level, the exclusion is more pronounced, as no woman was elected governor during the period, while the number of female deputy governors, though fluctuating, remained relatively low. Participation at the presidential and vice-presidential levels also remained negligible.

Table 1. Women's Representation in General Elections of 2011, 2015, 2019, 2023

Year	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
2011	7	109	26	360	0	36	3	36	0	1	0	1
2015	8	109	22	360	0	36	4	36	0	1	0	1
2019	8	109	13	360	0	36	3	36	0	1	0	1
2023	4	109	17	360	0	36	8	36	0	1	0	1

Source: Centre for Democracy and Development (2023)

where A = Senate, B = Total Senate Seats, C = House of Representative, D = Total Seats (House of Representative), E = Governor, F = Total Seats (Governor), G = Deputy Governor, H = Total seats (Deputy Governor), I = Vice President, J = Total Seats (Vice President), K = President, L = Total Seats (President).

Udjoh (2024) reported that women who expressed interest in the Anambra State governorship election were told that the Anambra governorship seat was not meant for girls. This viewpoint reflects deep-seated patriarchal norms that undermine the agenda for gender equality and empowerment. In some traditional African settings, women are still denied the right to participate in decision-making. As a result, any woman who dared to participate in politics in those areas may be stigmatized by the opposite gender as morally bankrupt (Orhero et al., 2023). The data generated, presented, and analyzed revealed that culture, bigotry, and destitution contributed to the increasingly alarming rate of female underrepresentation in Nigeria's politics. Likewise, the absence of effective and efficient implementation of gender-responsive policy, planning, and budgeting arrangements disrupted women's rights and empowerment programs (Dosumu & Jimi, 2024). Much literature holds the same view that a high number of women in Nigeria are marginalized and underrepresented in political, economic, and social arenas by their male counterparts, due to the opinion that they are inferior.

CONCLUSION

Gender inequalities in political representation are inconsistent with the UN SDGs' policy targets. Intersectionality theory employed in this study helped us see that the factors inhibiting most Nigerian women from participating in Nigeria's electoral politics may be hydra-headed. Nevertheless, achieving SDG 5 in Nigeria will require the political will of the Executive and the Legislature to make the 35% Affirmative Action a constitutional requirement. Furthermore, the

study underscored that gendered barriers to women's empowerment and electoral participation in Nigeria perpetuate a cycle of exclusion, thereby hindering the nation's progress toward gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Based on the findings of this study, we recommend that:

i. The National Assembly should expedite the statutory recognition, institutionalization, and enforcement of the 35 Percent affirmative action policy for women by enshrining it in the country's constitution and criminalizing its non-implementation.
ii. The empowerment of women in Nigeria should not be left solely to the government; NGOs in Nigeria should extend their mission statements to achieve women's political empowerment by providing inclusive education, financial services, and career mentorship to women.
iii. The Nigerian government should strengthen its women's empowerment policies by properly funding the Ministry of Women Affairs to regularly organize economic empowerment workshops and political conscientization for women across the federation, in conjunction with the National Orientation Agency.

Suggestions for Future Research

Although the current study has offered valuable insights into women's empowerment and political participation in Nigeria through the lens of SDG 5 and Intersectionality Theory, the topic still requires further academic research to expand knowledge and inform policy. This can be achieved by conducting a comparative analysis of Rwanda, South Africa, and Ghana to examine cross-national variations. draw lessons from high-performing contexts and develop contextually relevant policy interventions. Lastly, future researchers should examine women's lived experiences of empowerment and political participation in Nigeria using a phenomenological design. This phenomenological approach will enable researchers to collect rich, detailed descriptions of participants' lived experiences, fill gaps in the literature, and explain the intersecting systems of inequality and marginalization that women in Nigeria experience.

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