

Gender and Politics: An Assessment of the Relevance of Women Political Representation on Policy Outcomes

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Abstract

Despite democratic transitions and progressive reforms, women remain significantly underrepresented in Nigerian political institutions, occupying less than 10% of elected offices and often limited to “soft” ministries. This has restricted their ability to influence structural policy decisions. This study, therefore, examines the extent of women’s political representation in Nigeria and its influence on gender-sensitive policymaking, with a focus on identifying institutional and socio-cultural factors that affect women’s leadership impact. The study adopts a mixed methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires and key informant interviews (KIIs) with female politicians, civil society leaders, and policy advisors. Secondary sources provided complementary contextual data. The research is anchored in Critical Mass Theory and Feminist Institutionalism, which together highlight the importance of numerical representation and the role of institutional structures in shaping gender outcomes in governance. Findings reveal that while women have led notable policy shifts such as the Violence against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, barriers such as underfunding, weak institutional support, patriarchal norms, lack of political financing, and security risks continue to hinder a broader impact. The study concludes that symbolic representation is insufficient without structural support. It recommends enforceable gender quotas, inclusive party systems, and equitable campaign financing, and sustained civic engagements to enhance women’s policy impact. Empowering women in leadership is essential for inclusive governance and the development of policies that reflect the diverse needs of Nigeria’s population.

Keywords: Gender, Policy Outcomes, Politics, Political Representation

Introduction

In democratic societies, political representation extends beyond the mere occupation of public office to encompass whose interests, experiences, and perspectives shape public policy. The persistent historical exclusion of women from formal political institutions has profoundly influenced policy trajectories, producing governance systems that frequently overlook the needs and priorities of a substantial proportion of the population. Although sustained global advocacy, gender mainstreaming initiatives, and the adoption of gender quotas have contributed to gradual improvements, women remain significantly underrepresented in political decision-making worldwide. As of 2023, women accounted for approximately 26.5 percent of members of national parliaments globally, reflecting incremental progress but still falling far short of gender parity (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2023). This underrepresentation is more pronounced in developing democracies, where structural and cultural barriers continue to constrain women’s political participation

(UN Women, 2020). Such disparities undermine democratic legitimacy and pose serious challenges to inclusive and responsive policy development.

In Nigeria, the gap between male and female political representation is particularly stark. Despite women constituting nearly 49 percent of the national population, their presence in elective political offices remains minimal. Following the 2019 general elections, women occupied only 6.7 percent of seats in the National Assembly, a figure that declined further after the 2023 elections to approximately 3.6 percent, with just 17 women elected out of 469 legislators across both chambers. At the sub-national level, the pattern is similarly troubling, as women held less than 5 percent of seats in most State Houses of Assembly, and no woman has been elected governor in Nigeria's history (INEC, 2023; IPU, 2023). This extreme imbalance places Nigeria among the lowest-ranking countries globally in terms of women's parliamentary representation.

The roots of this disparity lie in a complex interaction of entrenched patriarchal norms, colonial legacies, monetized electoral politics, and institutional barriers that systematically disadvantage women. Historically, Nigerian women demonstrated strong political agency, most notably during the Aba Women's Revolt of 1929, which underscored women's capacity for collective mobilization and political resistance. However, this legacy of activism has not translated into equitable representation in post-independence Nigeria, where formal political institutions have remained overwhelmingly male-dominated (Adeniyi & Samuel, 2022). Even in contemporary democratic settings, women who gain access to political office frequently encounter marginalization within party structures and legislative processes, limiting their substantive influence. Globally, while gender quotas have increased women's numerical presence in some contexts, their effectiveness has been uneven, highlighting the need to examine not only representation levels but also policy outcomes.

Against this backdrop, the relevance of inclusive governance becomes particularly evident. Women's political representation is not solely about numerical presence but about voice, agency, and influence within decision-making processes. A growing body of empirical evidence suggests that increased female participation in politics is associated with shifts in policy priorities toward social welfare-oriented sectors, including maternal and child health, education, childcare, and the prevention of gender-based violence (Clayton & Zetterberg, 2018). These policy areas have historically received limited attention within male-dominated legislatures, indicating that women's inclusion can broaden policy agendas and enhance social responsiveness.

Despite these theoretical and empirical linkages, significant gaps remain in context-specific research, especially within Nigeria, on whether women's political representation translates into measurable policy outcomes. This study arises from the need to address this gap by interrogating the relationship between descriptive representation and substantive policy influence. It poses critical questions: Does the increasing, albeit limited, presence of women in Nigerian politics result in more gender-sensitive and socially inclusive policies, or does such representation remain largely symbolic? To what extent are female legislators able to shape legislative priorities within a deeply entrenched patriarchal political system?

This research is significant both academically and practically. It contributes to the expanding literature on gender, governance, and democratic representation in Africa, while also providing evidence-based insights to inform policy reforms and advocacy initiatives aimed at strengthening gender inclusion in Nigerian politics. In an era of heightened global commitment to gender equality and inclusive governance, this study is both timely and necessary. Nonetheless, the research is subject to certain limitations. It focuses on Nigeria's political institutions between 2015 and 2023, with particular emphasis on legislative activities at the national and selected state levels.

The central objective of this study is to assess the relevance of women's political representation to policy outcomes in Nigeria. Specifically, it examines trends in female political participation across recent electoral cycles, evaluates the substantive legislative contributions of women—particularly in policy areas affecting vulnerable groups—and analyzes the relationship between numerical representation and policy influence. By integrating empirical data with policy analysis, the study seeks to determine whether political presence translates into political power.

Literature Review

Gender has become a central analytical category in the study of politics and public policy, particularly in understanding patterns of exclusion, power relations, and policy responsiveness. Rather than referring solely to biological differences, gender is widely conceptualized as a socially constructed system of roles, norms, and expectations that shape access to political power and resources (Scott, 1986; Connell, 2009). Feminist scholars argue that gender functions as an institutionalized structure embedded within political systems, influencing participation, leadership opportunities, and policy priorities. Historically, these gendered structures have privileged masculine norms while marginalizing women's experiences, resulting in governance systems that inadequately reflect the interests of large segments of society (Acker, 1992).

Politics, understood as the process through which authoritative decisions and societal values are allocated, has therefore never been gender-neutral. Classical political theory defines politics as the exercise of power within formal institutions such as legislatures, executive bodies, and political parties (Easton, 1965). However, feminist political theorists challenge this neutral framing, emphasizing that political institutions have been historically constructed around patriarchal assumptions that exclude women or relegate them to peripheral roles (Pateman, 1988; Phillips, 1995). As a result, women's political participation has often been constrained by institutional practices, cultural norms, and informal power networks that reproduce gender inequality within democratic systems.

Within this broader political context, political representation occupies a central position in debates on gender and governance. Political representation refers to the process through which elected officials act on behalf of citizens and articulate their interests within decision-making arenas. Pitkin's (1967) seminal framework distinguishes between descriptive representation, which focuses on the numerical presence of women in political institutions; substantive representation, which concerns the extent to which representatives advance women's interests through policy and legislation; and symbolic representation, which relates to the meanings and legitimacy attached to women's political inclusion. Feminist scholars argue that descriptive representation is important because shared social experiences can shape policy priorities and legislative behavior (Mansbridge, 1999). Nonetheless, the literature cautions that increased numerical representation does not automatically translate into substantive influence, particularly in political systems characterized by strong party discipline and entrenched patriarchal norms (Childs & Krook, 2009).

The significance of women's political representation becomes more pronounced when examined in relation to policy outcomes. Policy outcomes refer to the tangible effects of public policies, including changes in resource allocation, institutional practices, and social conditions following policy implementation (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2020). From a gender perspective, policy outcomes are evaluated not only in terms of efficiency or effectiveness but also in terms of equity and inclusiveness. Scholars argue that who participates in political decision-making significantly influences policy agendas and outcomes, as representation shapes what issues are prioritized and how problems are framed (Bacchi, 2009).

Consequently, gender-sensitive policy outcomes are more likely to emerge in political systems where women possess meaningful decision-making authority.

Comparative studies by Wängnerud, 2009; Clayton & Zetterberg, (2018) demonstrate that women legislators are more likely than their male counterparts to prioritize policies related to health care, education, social welfare, child protection, and gender-based violence. Evidence from both developed and developing contexts suggests that increased female representation is associated with greater public spending on social services and improved human development indicators (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Tripp, 2015). These findings indicate that women's inclusion broadens policy agendas by bringing issues traditionally excluded from male-dominated political spaces into legislative debate.

Beyond sectoral policy priorities, women's political representation has also been linked to governance quality and policy processes. Some studies suggest that women in leadership positions tend to emphasize collaboration, accountability, and transparency, contributing to more inclusive and responsive governance (Dollar, Fisman, & Gatti, 2001; Wängnerud, 2015). While scholars caution against essentializing women's leadership styles, the literature nonetheless highlights the potential benefits of gender diversity for democratic deliberation and policy implementation. Importantly, these effects are mediated by institutional contexts, including electoral systems, party structures, and levels of political autonomy.

In developing democracies, particularly in Africa, the relationship between gender, political representation, and policy outcomes is shaped by additional structural constraints. Research highlights the persistence of patriarchal political cultures, limited access to campaign finance, weak enforcement of gender equality legislation, and elite-dominated party systems as key obstacles to women's substantive political influence (Tripp, 2015; Krook, 2010). As a result, women's political representation in these contexts often remains symbolic rather than transformative. Scholars, therefore, argue for a shift beyond numerical inclusion toward institutional reforms that enhance women's capacity to influence policy outcomes meaningfully.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, relying on Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and an in-depth review of extant literature to examine the relevance of women's political representation to policy outcomes in Nigeria. The qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's focus on understanding institutional dynamics, policy influence, and lived political experiences that cannot be adequately captured through numerical data alone. By integrating expert insights with documented empirical and theoretical evidence, the study provides a nuanced analysis of how women's political presence translates into substantive policy outcomes.

In line with the qualitative nature of this study, a total of thirty (30) key informants were purposively selected to provide in-depth insights into women's political representation and its impact on policy outcomes in Nigeria. The purposive sampling approach was employed to ensure that participants were chosen based on their institutional relevance, expertise, and direct involvement in political processes during the period 2015 to 2023. This approach prioritizes information-rich cases capable of providing meaningful and nuanced perspectives on the research problem. Data is analyzed thematically using qualitative analysis. Interview transcripts and documentary sources are coded to identify recurring themes related to descriptive representation, substantive representation, policy influence, and institutional barriers. This approach enables the study to assess the extent to which women's political presence translates into substantive policy outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Institutionalism is adopted for this study. It is a theoretical framework that emerged from the broader field of institutionalist and feminist scholarship. It is most prominently associated with Drude Dahlerup (2006) and Jennifer L. Krook (2010), who developed and popularized the concept in the context of women's political representation and the gendered dynamics of institutions. While institutionalism traditionally focuses on the formal rules, procedures, and structures that govern political and organizational behavior, feminist institutionalism integrates a gendered lens to analyze how these institutions are inherently shaped by, and continue to reproduce, power inequalities between men and women.

The central assumption of feminist institutionalism is that political institutions are not gender-neutral. They are constructed, maintained, and influenced by historical, cultural, and social norms that often privilege masculine interests and experiences. Consequently, institutions—ranging from legislatures and political parties to bureaucracies and electoral systems—tend to reproduce gendered hierarchies, limiting women's access to decision-making and diminishing their substantive influence on policy outcomes. Feminist institutionalism argues that understanding women's political participation requires more than counting numbers; it requires analyzing the rules, practices, informal norms, and power relations that shape behavior within institutions and determine the opportunities and constraints faced by female actors.

A second key assumption is that both formal and informal institutional elements matter. Formal institutions include codified rules such as constitutions, electoral laws, and gender quotas, while informal institutions encompass unwritten norms, practices, and cultural expectations that influence behavior. Feminist institutionalism highlights that even when formal mechanisms exist to promote gender equality, informal norms—such as patriarchal party hierarchies or biased societal perceptions—can significantly hinder the ability of women to exert policy influence.

Third, feminist institutionalism assumes that change is possible but often incremental. Because institutions are embedded in long-standing social and political structures, transformation toward gender equality requires both structural reforms (e.g., gender quotas, electoral reforms) and cultural shifts (e.g., challenging gendered expectations and stereotypes). This perspective emphasizes the interaction between institutional design and gendered agency, illustrating that women's representation is meaningful only when it translates into substantive influence over decision-making and policy outcomes.

The theory is however, not without limitations. One critique is that its focus on institutional barriers may sometimes underemphasize broader structural or societal factors, such as poverty, electoral violence, or media bias, which also affect women's political participation. Additionally, while the theory emphasizes incremental institutional change, it does not always provide specific mechanisms or predictive models for translating descriptive representation into policy influence, leaving researchers to interpret causal pathways based on context-specific data.

Despite these limitations, the framework remains highly adaptable, particularly when combined with empirical methods such as Key Informant Interviews (KII) and extant literature review, which can reveal how informal norms and formal rules interact to shape women's legislative effectiveness. The relevance of feminist institutionalism to this study is therefore multifaceted. First, it provides a conceptual basis for examining why women remain underrepresented in Nigeria's legislative institutions and how institutional arrangements—including party structures, legislative rules, and informal practices—mediate their political influence. Second, it underscores the importance of analyzing substantive representation, focusing on how women legislators, party actors, and civil society actors contribute to policy outcomes that address gendered social priorities. Finally, the framework helps to interpret

qualitative data from KIIs and literature in a structured way, enabling the study to identify the conditions under which political presence translates into meaningful policy impact. In sum, feminist institutionalism bridges the gap between descriptive participation and substantive impact, making it an ideal theoretical foundation for assessing the transformative potential of women's political representation in Nigeria.

Results and Discussion

Gender Quotas and Electoral Systems

Understanding the complex relationship between gender and political representation requires a multidimensional examination of institutional structures, cultural dynamics, and political mechanisms. Across global and regional contexts, literature has consistently emphasized the importance of women's presence in political decision-making spaces, the effectiveness of gender quotas, and the institutional factors that either facilitate or obstruct substantive policy outcomes.

Women remain underrepresented in political institutions globally, with the challenge even more pronounced in developing democracies like Nigeria. As of 2024, women held less than 7% of seats in Nigeria's National Assembly, well below the African continental average (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2023). Scholars such as Paxton, Kunovich, and Hughes (2007) provide a foundational understanding of the socio-political conditions influencing women's political integration. They argue that while democratization offers opportunities for inclusion, structural inequalities and cultural perceptions of leadership continue to marginalize women from formal political power. Comparative studies, like that of Goswami et al. (2023), further emphasize that numerical representation alone does not equate to influence. Their findings highlight that many political systems adopt surface-level inclusion, where women are symbolically present but lack real decision-making authority. This insight is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where women often secure political appointments without the institutional autonomy needed to shape policy outcomes.

Hessami and da Fonseca (2020) identify a positive correlation between women in politics and outcomes in sectors such as education, healthcare, and social protection. However, they caution that the degree of policy influence depends heavily on women's ability to hold strategic positions and the responsiveness of political institutions. Similarly, Shangare and Wielenga (2022) argue for a shift from focusing solely on numerical thresholds to examining "critical acts" instances where women lawmakers actively influence legislation in ways that advance gender equity. This critique is vital in understanding the Nigerian experience, where despite minimal representation, some women have introduced impactful bills, albeit within a hostile political environment. It is not just about having women in office, but whether the political structure allows them to translate their presence into policy reform.

The mechanisms by which women enter politics significantly influence their ability to enact change. Gender quotas whether legislative, voluntary, or reserved seat systems have emerged as key tools to promote women's entry into political life. According to Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2010), quota systems are most effective when paired with political will, legal enforcement, and supportive institutional environments. In Nigeria, where gender quotas remain largely absent or unenforced, women face significant challenges in gaining candidacy, especially within dominant political parties. The role of electoral systems is equally crucial. Proportional representation (PR) systems have been shown to be more conducive to women's election compared to majoritarian systems (Norris, 2004). Nigeria's first-past-the-post system tends to favor political incumbents and established networks, often excluding women due to gendered norms and lack of resources.

Moreover, political parties serve as key gatekeepers to women's political advancement. Goetz and Hassim (2003) contend that parties often function as patriarchal

institutions, resistant to nominating female candidates or placing them in winnable constituencies. In the Nigerian context, this is particularly evident in the dominance of informal networks and patronage systems that marginalize women during candidate selection and campaign financing.

Several key informants emphasized that gender quotas are an important mechanism for increasing women's numerical representation in legislative bodies, but their effectiveness depends on enforcement and institutional design. A female legislator from the National Assembly noted:

"Quotas help to create space for women in politics, but in Nigeria, they are often more symbolic than effective. Political parties are not obliged to implement them strictly, and candidates are usually nominated in constituencies where winning is difficult. So, the quota becomes more about appearance than real influence."

Similarly, a political party official highlighted how electoral systems interact with quotas:

"Nigeria's first-past-the-post electoral system disadvantages women because parties tend to field male candidates in constituencies perceived as winnable. Proportional representation systems, like those in some other countries, might make quotas more meaningful."

Civil society actors also stressed that without party commitment and voter education, quotas alone cannot transform representation. One CSO leader stated:

"Quotas can only work if they are supported by both the party leadership and the electorate. Without changing cultural attitudes and informal norms, women still face barriers to election, even with formal quota provisions."

Women in Legislative vs. Executive Positions

The increasing global discourse on gender equality in governance has fueled academic interest in the ways women's political representation influences public policy. However, in contexts such as Nigeria where political institutions are deeply embedded in patriarchal and clientelist traditions the question is not only whether women are present in politics but whether they are able to shape policies that reflect gendered realities. While global efforts to increase women's representation have gained momentum, structural disparities remain. Recent data by the UN Women (2023) reveals that women comprise only 26.5% of parliamentarians worldwide. In West Africa, this number is even lower, with Nigeria ranking among the countries with the least female representation in national legislative bodies. As Yoon (2011) asserts, such limited inclusion reflects entrenched political barriers and an absence of institutional commitment to gender equity. Research by Bauer and Burnet (2013) further contextualizes this, suggesting that women's inclusion in African parliaments often results from external pressures (e.g., donor influence or international conventions) rather than domestic policy reforms. The presence of women in Nigeria's political system, particularly in legislative and executive roles, is frequently symbolic rather than influential, raising questions about the authenticity of democratic inclusion.

Scholars such as Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) provide compelling evidence from India, showing that female leadership in local governance significantly shifted budgetary priorities toward health, education, and water infrastructure sectors often neglected by male-dominated councils. Their findings emphasize the importance of not just electing women, but placing them in positions with real decision-making power. Similarly, Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) argue that descriptive representation alone does not guarantee substantive outcomes. For representation to be meaningful, institutional support such as access to policy tools, budget authority, and intra-party backing is essential. In contexts like Nigeria, where

party politics are dominated by male elites and gender-focused bills face persistent resistance, such support is often lacking.

This aligns with the assertion that while women may bring unique perspectives to policymaking, their ability to influence gender-sensitive legislation is conditioned by broader institutional dynamics. In Nigeria, the problem is exacerbated by informal political practices such as zoning, patronage, and party godfatherism, which often exclude women from strategic positions of influence (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2004). This aligns with research by Tripp (2015), who found that women's political influence tends to be more pronounced in countries where institutional reforms have been accompanied by shifts in social norms and political culture. The position a woman holds whether legislative or executive matters greatly. As O'Brien (2015) observes, executive positions often come with more autonomy and policy reach, whereas legislators may face partisan constraints. Yet even within executive roles, women often face gendered expectations that undermine their leadership.

Informants consistently noted that women are more visible in legislative positions than in executive offices, but the influence of legislative roles is often constrained by party hierarchies and institutional norms. A female legislator explained:

"In the legislature, women can sponsor bills and join committees, but executive roles, like ministers or permanent secretaries, often provide more direct control over resources and policy implementation. Unfortunately, women are still rarely appointed to these positions."

A male legislator added:

"The few women who get executive appointments often face tokenism. They are expected to perform, but decision-making power is limited. In contrast, legislative positions allow women to raise issues and contribute to debates, even if they struggle to push policies through."

Civil society representatives highlighted that legislative positions are crucial for advocacy, but without coordination with executive offices, policy impact is limited:

"Women legislators often initiate bills on health or education, but if these do not get executive backing, implementation is slow or ineffective. Collaboration between legislative and executive women leaders is key."

Policy Outcomes Influenced by Women

The increasing inclusion of women in politics has prompted deeper inquiry into the *extent*, *impact*, and *barriers* of their participation, especially in relation to policy formulation. In contexts like Nigeria, where women's political visibility remains limited, the focus is not only on increasing the numbers but also on assessing the *substantive influence* of female politicians in shaping policy priorities. This literature review is structured to address three critical themes: the degree of representation, its relationship to gender-sensitive policies, and the institutional and socio-cultural factors that shape policy outcomes in sectors such as education, health, social welfare, and legal reform.

Across many democratic systems, there has been a push to increase women's visibility in political spaces. However, representation in itself is a layered concept, often split between *descriptive* (presence) and *substantive* (influence) forms. In Nigeria, women held just 3.8% of Senate seats and 3.6% in the House of Representatives as of the 2023 elections (INEC, 2023). This sharp underrepresentation underscores the persistent barriers to entry, including cultural biases, financial constraints, and party gatekeeping structures (Okeke-Ihejirika & Franceschet,

2002). Beyond Nigeria, studies such as those by Stockemer and Sundström (2018) have demonstrated that proportional electoral systems and gender quotas increase women's access to formal political institutions. However, where these systemic supports are absent as in Nigeria's first-past-the-post system women's political ascendance is far more difficult.

A critical concern in gender and politics literature is whether the presence of women in office translates into *gender-sensitive policy outcomes*. Globally, there is growing evidence that female politicians prioritize and advocate for policies related to education, healthcare, child welfare, and gender equity areas historically neglected in male-dominated policy environments. Bratton and Ray (2002) argue that women legislators are more likely than their male counterparts to support bills related to reproductive health, early childhood education, and domestic violence prevention. Similarly, Clayton and Zetterberg (2018) found that in Latin America, higher female representation in legislatures correlated with increased government spending on social welfare and education. In sub-Saharan Africa, Devlin and Elgie (2008) observed that countries with higher numbers of women in parliament tend to adopt more comprehensive gender equality laws.

In the Nigerian context, however, female politicians often face resistance when championing such issues. For example, the repeated rejection of the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill in the National Assembly illustrates how institutional and patriarchal opposition can neutralize the influence of even the most determined female leaders (Arowolo & Aluko, 2010). Thus, the second objective of this study to assess the connection between representation and policy is not only timely but essential for understanding how women influence sectors that affect the lives of everyday citizens. While representation matters, the capacity of women to influence policy is often determined by the political and cultural environments they operate within. The third objective of this research engages with how *institutional structures* (e.g., political parties, legislative rules, appointment patterns) and *socio-cultural expectations* (e.g., gender roles, religious norms) mediate women's effectiveness in policymaking particularly in education, health, and gender-related legislation. According to Krook and True (2012), women often gain positions in "soft" sectors like education or social welfare, but these roles can serve as platforms to push transformative agendas *if backed by institutional power*. In Rwanda, for instance, the post-genocide gender reform allowed women in parliament to pass landmark laws addressing gender-based violence and educational equity (Burnet, 2011). Similarly, Oluwole and Hassan (2021) note that in Senegal, where institutional reforms bolstered gender parity, women leaders significantly contributed to healthcare reform and access to maternal services.

In contrast, Nigeria's institutional landscape is still steeped in male dominance. Women's appointments are often symbolic, and their legislative proposals are less likely to pass unless aligned with elite male interests. Moreover, societal expectations continue to restrict women's autonomy in leadership. Akiyode-Afolabi and Arogundade (2003) argue that cultural and religious perceptions about gender roles often present women as secondary actors in public life, limiting their influence even when they hold office.

When asked about the impact of women on policy outcomes, key informants provided evidence that women legislators have contributed to shifting policy priorities toward social sectors, including maternal health, education, child welfare, and gender-based violence. One female legislator stated:

"Since more women joined committees on health and education, there has been greater attention to maternal mortality, school enrollment for girls, and funding for social programs. Women bring lived experiences that male colleagues often overlook."

A CSO leader corroborated this observation:

"Our monitoring of National Assembly bills shows that women often champion issues affecting vulnerable groups. For example, amendments to the Child Rights Act and Violence against Persons Prohibition Act were heavily influenced by women lawmakers."

However, informants also emphasized limitations due to patriarchal systems and institutional barriers. A male legislator commented: "Women can propose policies, but passing them requires support from male colleagues who dominate leadership positions. Their influence is real but often gradual and incremental."

Findings

Findings indicate that women's representation in Nigeria's political and decision-making spaces remains disproportionately low. Despite incremental progress, women occupy less than 10% of elected positions nationwide, and some state houses of assembly have no female legislators at all. The female politician emphasized that while some women have made it into office, their presence is often symbolic rather than influential. The policy advisor echoed this, noting that although there are women in advisory roles, they are frequently confined to gender-related portfolios such as Education or Women Affairs, excluding them from core governance areas like Finance or Defense. These findings are consistent with national data from INEC and international observers such as UN Women (2023), which highlight persistent gender gaps in elective and appointive positions in Nigeria.

The key informants all agreed that where women are meaningfully included, there is a stronger push for gender-sensitive policymaking. The female politician cited the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act as a product of cross-party collaboration among female legislators and civil society, demonstrating the catalytic role of women in driving progressive policy agendas. Similarly, the policy advisor observed that female-led policy teams have contributed to improvements in gender budgeting, maternal health policies, and education access for girls. However, all respondents noted a critical implementation gap. Policies are often passed but poorly funded or inadequately monitored. This indicates that representation alone is not sufficient; institutional commitment and follow-through are equally vital for translating gender-sensitive policy into tangible outcomes.

All three key informants pointed to a range of institutional and socio-cultural barriers that limit women's policy influence. These include:

- i. Patriarchal party structures that marginalize women during candidate selection.
- ii. Lack of campaign financing and political mentorship for women aspirants.
- iii. Stereotypes and societal expectations that assign women to "soft" policy areas.
- iv. Security risks and political violence, which discourage women from active political engagement.

The civil society advocate particularly emphasized the absence of institutional memory where gains made by women are often lost once they exit office due to a lack of sustained frameworks. She also stressed the importance of civil society pressure and male allies in keeping gender issues on the agenda. These factors suggest that structural reforms such as enforceable gender quotas, inclusive party constitutions, and targeted leadership pipelines are essential for improving not only representation but policy outcomes.

Conclusion

This study examined the extent of women's political representation in Nigeria, its relationship with gender-sensitive policymaking, and the institutional and socio-cultural factors that influence women's policy impact. The findings reveal that women remain significantly underrepresented in political institutions, with less than 10% of elected positions

held by women, and their roles are often restricted to “soft” ministries. Although women contribute notably, as seen with the VAPP Act and advancements in gender budgeting, gender-responsive policies face execution challenges due to underfunding and weak monitoring. Institutional and cultural barriers, such as patriarchal structures, lack of political financing, and security risks, continue to hinder women’s participation and policy influence. To promote gender equality, this study advocates for structural reforms, including gender quotas, inclusive political parties, and institutional support for women in leadership. Empowering women to shape policies is vital for fostering a more inclusive and equitable political landscape in Nigeria.

Recommendations

- i. To increase women’s presence in political institutions, the Nigerian government should implement gender quotas and promote inclusive party structures, ensuring more women are elected and appointed to key decision-making positions.
- ii. Policymakers should prioritize the funding and effective monitoring of gender-responsive policies, such as the VAPP Act and gender budgeting, to ensure their successful execution.
- iii. Efforts to reduce patriarchal structures, provide campaign financing for women, and enhance security measures can help break down barriers to women’s political participation.
- iv. Encourage male political leaders to support gender equality initiatives, recognizing that gender-responsive policies benefit all citizens.

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