CHALLENGES OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FOURTH REPUBLIC

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Abstract

Research problem: *The vital study problem of this study is to observe why Nigerian women stay to involvement low levels of political participation and representation regardless of the representative chances on condition that by the Fourth Republic, and to identify the social, economic, political, institutional, and cultural factors responsible for this situation. The study will also inspect methods that can be adopted to overcome these tests and increase women's evocative participation in Nigerian policymaking*
Methods/Theory: *The paper usages qualitative method by secondary source of data i.e textbooks, academic journal, correspondents and report from international organizations likes UN Women and a historical methodology was also used to examine women's participation from 1999 to the present. Liberal feminist theory is adopted for to the study. Liberal Feminist Theory serves as the theoretical framework for this study because it provides an appropriate lens for examining the inequalities and institutional barriers that limit women's participation in Nigerian politics. The theory argues that women should enjoy equal rights and opportunities with men in all spheres of society, including political participation and leadership.*
Results: *The results uncovered that short participation of women in politics was adopted by sidelining, discrimination, ethnicity, religion, and the environment of post-colonial politics. Administration should eradicate organizational and legal obstacles that obstruct women's participation in politics and decision-making and grip those blocking them responsible. Civil societies and government should offer exercise programs for undeveloped individuals and publishers, women, and men on political systems, women's right to participation, and parts in policymaking.*
Conclusion: *The findings revealed that utmost of the women in political points were facing trials related with the female gender, including intimidation, harassment and biases. It show that women's political participation is still truncated, and the barriers hindering their success stem from religion, culture, tradition, and patriarchy, among others. Societal perception also hinders women as they are seen as subordinates and not equal to men. Furthermore, women lack the monetary capabilities to pursue political goals. There is a lack of adequate policies from the government absorbed at improving women's political participation.*
Key Contribution to Knowledge: *The study have observed separate factors such as culture, political parties, poverty, electoral violence, and discrimination, this study carries these factors together to show how they interrelate to pressure women's political participation. Existing research confirms that women's representation has remained very low despite various government policies promoting gender addition.*
Recommendation: *The study recommends a complete and synchronized approach to women's political participation in Nigeria. Since cultural norms, political parties, poverty and economic constraints, democratic violence, discernment, and weak policy*

implementation relate with one another, addressing only one encounter will not be sufficient. Sustainable improvement requires simultaneous reforms in the political, economic, institutional, electoral, and social environments of the Nigerian Fourth Republic.

Introduction

The political participation of women has developed as a crucial standard for democratic development and comprehensiveness across the world. Political participation does not only suggest the act of voting but covers to questioning elective positions, attractive in policy-making, and prompting governance procedures. In most democratic civilizations, women's representation in politics has been accepted as a requisite factor in ensuring that governance returns the interests of all sectors of society. However, in Nigeria, particularly under the Fourth Republic (1999–present), the inclusion of women in politics has remained abysmally low despite their demographic strength, educational advancement, and legal recognition as alike citizens.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with women constituting nearly half of its estimated 200 million people (World Bank, 2023). Women also account for roughly half of registered voters, and evidence from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) consistently shows that women are among the most active participants during voter record-keeping and election crowd (INEC, 2023). Yet, inconsistently, this demographic weight has not translated into proportional political representation. Women continue to occupy only a marginal fraction of elective and appointive positions. As of 2024, women held just 3.9% of parliamentary seats in Nigeria, compared with 23% in sub-Saharan Africa and over 25% globally (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024; World Bank, 2023).

This persistent underrepresentation is not merely a statistical anomaly; it is symptomatic of deeper structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that impede gender inclusiveness in governance. Nigeria has committed itself to global frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment. At the national level, the National Gender Policy (2006) set an aspirational target of 35% representation of women in decision-making positions. However, more than two decades into the Fourth Republic, these commitments have not translated into practical results. Instead, women's share of political office has stagnated or even declined in certain electoral cycles (Adesoji, 2019).

The Fourth Republic, inaugurated in 1999, ushered in high expectations for democratic renewal after years of military dictatorship. The return to civil rule was meant to expand spaces for citizen participation, particularly for historically marginalized groups, including women. However, studies have shown that Nigerian politics during this period has remained overwhelmingly male-dominated, violent, monetized, and exclusionary (Suleiman et al., 2017; Likinyo & Arum, 2025). Political parties, which serve as the primary gatekeepers of elective positions, have consistently failed to provide a level playing field for women. Instead, internal party politics, nomination procedures, and financial barriers have reinforced male dominance, leaving women at the margins of decision-making.

The exclusion of women from political leadership has significant implications for

Nigeria's democratic project. First, it undermines the principle of representativeness by denying a substantial portion of the population an effective voice in governance. Second, it contributes to policy gaps, especially in areas such as maternal health, gender-based violence, education, and social welfare, where women's perspectives are particularly crucial. Third, it perpetuates structural inequalities, reinforcing patriarchal norms and limiting the transformative potential of democracy in Nigeria. Scholars have argued that where women are excluded from political leadership, governance tends to be less inclusive, less accountable, and less effective in addressing the needs of diverse groups (Tripp, 2015).

Against this background, this study critically analyzes the challenges of women's political participation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The analysis is framed around five key themes: socio-cultural barriers, economic constraints, political party structures, violence and intimidation, and media representation. By examining these interrelated challenges, the study seeks to uncover why progress has been slow despite decades of democratic rule and widespread advocacy for gender equality. It also draws comparative lessons from other African countries that have implemented gender quotas and significantly improved women's representation, such as Rwanda and Senegal.

The relevance of this study is twofold. Academically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on gender and politics in Africa by providing a critical evaluation of Nigeria's democratic experience. Practically, it provides insights for policymakers, political parties, civil society organizations, and women's advocacy groups seeking to promote gender inclusivity in governance. This research underscores the urgent need for institutional reforms, cultural reorientation, and legal measures to ensure that Nigeria's democracy evolves in line with international standards of inclusivity and equity.

Literature Review and Context

Political participation has been broadly understood as the process through which individuals and groups engage with political institutions, influence decision-making, and shape policy outcomes. It extends beyond the act of voting to include contesting elections, participating in party activities, lobbying, advocacy, and other forms of civic engagement. Women's political participation, therefore, involves not only their presence within the political system but also the extent to which they can influence governance on equal terms with men. Scholars in feminist political theory have argued that democracy is incomplete and loses legitimacy when nearly half of the population is systematically excluded from its processes (Phillips, 1995). This perspective situates women's political participation not only as a democratic right but also as a crucial means of achieving inclusive governance and sustainable development.

The Nigerian experience must be contextualized within its historical and cultural trajectory. In pre-colonial societies, women held significant political authority in different parts of what is today Nigeria. Studies have shown that Yoruba women served as market leaders, regents, and advisers in traditional councils, while Igbo women played roles in collective decision-making through institutions such as the "Umuada" and "Mikiri" (Mba, 1982; Awe, 1992). Similarly, the Hausa-Fulani acknowledged the influence of certain women in courtly and religious matters. However, the advent of colonial administration marginalized these roles by privileging male traditional rulers under indirect rule (Okonjo, 1991). This restructuring disrupted indigenous systems where women had complementary authority and laid the foundation for the political exclusion of women in post-colonial Nigeria.

In the years following independence, the pattern of women's marginalization continued. Despite their active involvement in nationalist struggles and in mass mobilization during the independence movements, women were largely excluded from the formal political structures that emerged in the First Republic. Subsequent years of military rule between 1966 and 1999 entrenched this marginalization by centralizing political authority in predominantly male military elites, thereby denying women access to institutionalized power. The restoration of democracy in 1999, which marked the beginning of the Fourth Republic, raised expectations that women would finally gain significant entry into politics. Yet, scholarship has consistently shown that structural barriers, institutional biases, and enduring patriarchal norms have continued to limit women's political advancement (Adesoji, 2019).

Comparative experiences from other regions of Africa and the world highlight Nigeria's slow progress. Globally, women's representation in politics has been on the rise, with women holding an average of 26.5% of parliamentary seats as of 2024 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). In sub-Saharan Africa, countries such as Rwanda, Senegal, and South Africa have achieved notable representation rates of over 40% by implementing legislated gender quotas and proportional representation systems (Tripp, 2015). Rwanda, in particular, institutionalized women's representation after its civil war by embedding quotas into its constitution, resulting in women constituting more than 60% of its parliament (Burnet, 2011). These successes underscore the importance of deliberate institutional reforms in reshaping gender relations in politics. By contrast, Nigeria has not adopted binding quotas, and its majoritarian electoral system, combined with weak gender policies, continues to disadvantage women.

One of the most frequently cited structural barriers to women's political participation in Nigeria is the role of political parties. Parties remain the central gatekeepers to political office, but their internal structures and nomination processes are often non-transparent, financially demanding, and hostile to women. Candidate selection is heavily influenced by "godfatherism" and patron-client politics, both of which systematically favor male aspirants (Okoosi-Simbine, 2012). Party primaries are also capital-intensive, requiring aspirants to purchase expensive nomination forms and mobilize large numbers of supporters. Since women generally face economic disadvantages in access to land, credit, and employment opportunities, they often lack the financial resources to compete effectively with men in such political contests (Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2003).

Socio-cultural and religious factors further compound these barriers. Nigeria remains a highly patriarchal society, where politics is frequently constructed as a male domain. Women who attempt to cross this boundary are often stigmatized as being immoral, overly ambitious, or unfit for leadership. In the northern regions, cultural and religious interpretations of Islam often restrict women's public roles and discourage political participation (Adamu, 2004). In the southern regions, cultural stereotypes persist, portraying women as too emotional or weak to handle political office (Olarinmoye, 2023). This "gendered political culture," as Chinedu-Nwankwor and Nkereuwem (2021) describe it, imposes double scrutiny on female politicians, who are judged not only on their political competence but also on their adherence to gendered expectations.

Another significant challenge is electoral violence and gendered intimidation. Nigerian elections are notorious for violence, and women are disproportionately affected. Reports from civil society organizations have

documented instances of harassment, intimidation, and even sexual assault targeted specifically at female aspirants (STER, 2022). These threats discourage many women from pursuing political ambitions. Additionally, media representation plays a role in shaping public perceptions. Nigerian media frequently reinforces gender stereotypes by emphasizing female politicians' marital status, appearance, or morality rather than their qualifications or policy positions (Chinedu-Nwankwor & Nkereuwem, 2021). This contributes to a climate of skepticism about women's political leadership and undermines their legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate.

While Nigeria has introduced several policy frameworks aimed at improving gender equality, most notably the National Gender Policy of 2006, which recommends a minimum of 35% women's representation in decision-making, their impact has been limited. Scholars argue that these policies remain largely aspirational because they are not backed by binding legislation or strong political will (Suleiman et al., 2017; Adesoji, 2019). Unlike other African states that have embedded gender quotas into their constitutions or electoral laws, Nigeria has relied on voluntary measures that have proven insufficient. Advocacy groups continue to call for legislative reforms, but resistance from entrenched political elites has slowed progress.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on women's political participation in Nigeria, several gaps remain. Much of the literature has focused on national-level politics, with relatively little attention paid to the experiences of women in local government, where grassroots mobilization is both crucial and challenging. Additionally, while the barriers of culture and finance have been well documented, fewer studies examine how women navigate these challenges through strategies such as coalition-building, women's associations, and grassroots advocacy. Furthermore, there is insufficient analysis of regional variations, despite evident differences in women's participation between northern and southern Nigeria. By situating the analysis within the broader context of the Fourth Republic, this study aims to address some of these gaps while critically engaging with both structural and cultural dimensions of the problem.

Trends in Women's Political Representation

Over the last 25 years, Nigeria has shown a persistent pattern: high and roughly equal electorate participation by women (registration and turnout) has not translated into candidacy or office-holding parity. Women have been a steady ~50% of voters but have remained a small minority of candidates and a very small minority of winners in elective office; at the national level, the share of women in the National Assembly has hovered at only a few percent and actually declined after 2015-2019 in recent cycles. This basic disconnect near-parity at the polls but deep under-representation in the legislature and executive is the single most important trend to grasp about Nigerian politics today (Inter-Parliamentary Union; World Bank; INEC).

At the return to democracy in 1999, women occupied only a handful of seats in both chambers of the National Assembly. Over the next two decades, there were small, intermittent gains, for example, modest increases in the early 2000s, but no sustained upward trajectory comparable to regional peers. By 2015 some observers recorded a small peak in women's presence in the House and Senate compared with 1999 levels, but the 2019 and 2023 cycles saw a reversal or stagnation: the 10th National Assembly (elected 2023) counted only a very small number of women (about four women in the Senate and only mid-teens in the House), placing Nigeria among the lowest countries in

sub-Saharan Africa for women's parliamentary representation (IPU; PLAC; national trackers). In short: small gains early on, brief peaks, then decline/stagnation, no sustained convergence toward parity.

Furthermore, a critical trend is that women are underrepresented at every stage of the electoral pipeline. In 2023, roughly only 10% of all candidates for national and subnational offices were women (with variation by office), and the vast majority of those women ran on smaller parties rather than the major parties that win most seats. Because parties are decisive gatekeepers in Nigeria's majoritarian system, this concentration of women in non-competitive party tickets means candidacy itself is a structural bottleneck (Premium Times; CDD West Africa; ElectHer analysis). Moreover, large proportions of women who contest lose at primaries or in the general election reports from 2023 described very high attrition (many female aspirants "crashed out"), showing that the pipeline problem is not only entry but survival through nominating contests and the general election.

Also, multiple analyses of the 2023 cycle found that around 90% of women candidates ran on the tickets of smaller parties rather than the dominant parties (APC, PDP). That concentration is consequential: small parties rarely win winnable seats, so even when women run, they face a low probability of success. In 2023, the surge of a third-party (Labour Party) and new electoral dynamics actually hurt some incumbent women in the big parties; several women lost to male candidates on the Labour Party platform, underscoring how shifts in party fortunes can produce counterintuitive effects for female representation. In short, women's over-reliance on smaller parties plus volatile party realignments is a structural reason for persistently low office-holding.

Across the Fourth Republic, no woman has been elected president or vice-president, and until recently, no woman had been elected governor of any state. The 2023 governorship contests produced few female contestants (only a small percentage of all gubernatorial candidates were women), and none of those bids produced a clear, uncontested breakthrough. Contested declarations (e.g., the controversial Adamawa collation episode) highlighted how fraught these contests can be for female aspirants and how institutional irregularities can create false hopes, then legal and political reversals. The executive branch, therefore, remains overwhelmingly male, and brief moments of near-breakthrough have not converted into historic, durable wins.

One notable trend is that appointive offices, federal cabinet, and ministerial lists have tended to show higher female presence than elective offices, but still below stated policy goals. For example, President Tinubu's early ministerial lists included women but did not meet the oft-cited 35% target; initial cabinet rounds showed roughly mid-20s percent female representation in some announcements. Appointments are, therefore, a partial corrective (executive discretion can raise female representation quickly), but they do not substitute for electoral inclusion because appointees are not a permanent, representative check on legislative power.

Trends are not uniform across the federation. Some states and local councils show slightly better outcomes for women, often where strong civil society mobilization or local quota/affirmative action measures exist. In contrast, many states, especially where conservative socio-religious norms are strongest, show near-zero female representation at executive or legislative levels. Micro-studies of specific LGAs (local government areas) in 2023 show that women continue to play important mobilizing roles for parties even when they are not fielded as candidates, which highlights the "mobilization without representation" pattern: women

deliver votes and organize communities but win few seats. This regional heterogeneity suggests that reforms may benefit from tailoring national quotas plus state-level strategies.

Scholars and analysts identify several time-sensitive drivers behind the trend line: party gatekeeping and expensive primaries that favor wealthy, male insiders; campaign finance and vote-buying dynamics that raise the cost of winning; gendered violence and intimidation that deter female aspirants; and media and societal stereotyping that reduce women's visibility and perceived electability. These drivers interact: for instance, party primaries that require large cash outlays disproportionately exclude women, and when small parties become electorally salient, women clustered in those parties remain unlikely to win. Several post-2022 analyses emphasize that without structural reforms, these dynamics will continue to depress female representation.

The 2023 general elections were widely discussed as a test of whether recent civic mobilization, youth movements, and social media activism could open space for historically excluded groups, including women. Empirically, 2023 did not produce a breakthrough for women. Women constituted roughly 10% of candidates and secured only a low single-digit share of elected offices; the number of women in the National Assembly fell or stagnated compared with previous assemblies. Analysts conclude that 2023 marked an inflection point in public debate about inclusion, but it did not constitute a durable turning point in representation unless accompanied by party reforms, legislated quotas, or systematic pipeline development for women candidates.

Barriers and Challenges to Women's Political Participation

Women face multifaceted barriers to political participation, encompassing legal, social, economic, and institutional dimensions. These obstacles not only hinder individual women but also impede the realization of inclusive and representative governance.

Legal and Institutional Constraints

Legal frameworks often fail to provide equal opportunities for women in politics. In many regions, laws and policies are either absent or inadequately enforced, limiting women's access to political rights and positions. For instance, discriminatory laws related to inheritance, citizenship, and family rights can restrict women's autonomy and participation in public life. Additionally, the absence of gender-sensitive electoral systems and quotas further exacerbates underrepresentation. Even where quotas exist, their effectiveness is often undermined by weak enforcement and manipulation by political elites, as seen in countries like Algeria, where reforms led to a decrease in female parliamentary representation despite the introduction of gender quotas.

Socio-Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes

Deeply ingrained societal norms and stereotypes about gender roles significantly impede women's political engagement. In many cultures, leadership is perceived as a predominantly male domain, and women are expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over public life. Such perceptions discourage women from pursuing political careers and can lead to a lack of support from families and communities. The 2023 UNDP Gender Social Norms Index highlighted that nearly half of the global population believes men make better political leaders than women, underscoring the pervasive nature of these stereotypes (UNDP, 2023).

Economic Barriers

Economic disparities present a significant challenge to women's political participation. Running for political office often requires substantial financial resources for campaigning, networking, and media engagement. Women, particularly in developing regions, frequently lack access to such resources due to lower income levels, limited property rights, and restricted access to credit. This financial disadvantage is compounded by the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work that women bear, limiting the time and energy available for political activities. The World Economic Forum reported that women often pay a high cost to be political leaders in their communities, facing financial barriers that limit their participation.

Violence and Harassment

Violence and harassment are pervasive challenges that deter women from entering and remaining in politics. These acts range from physical and sexual violence to psychological abuse and online harassment. Such violence not only affects the targeted individuals but also sends a chilling message to other women considering political involvement. The European Foundation for Democracy noted that women in politics, particularly those from marginalized groups, face overwhelming levels of abuse and gendered disinformation campaigns, which traditional and social media often fuel and perpetuate.

Media Bias and Gendered Coverage

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of political figures. However, women politicians often face biased and gendered media coverage. Research indicates that female politicians are more likely to be portrayed in terms of their appearance, family roles, and emotional responses, rather than their policies or competencies. Such portrayals reinforce stereotypes and undermine women's authority and credibility. A meta-analysis published in the Journal of Communication revealed that women in politics are often evaluated less positively than equally qualified men, facing challenges in being recognized as experts and leaders.

Institutional Barriers and Party Dynamics

Political parties are central to the political process, yet they often serve as gatekeepers that limit women's access to political office. Party structures and candidate selection processes frequently favor male candidates, either through explicit bias or informal networks. Even in systems with gender quotas, parties may circumvent these measures by placing women in less winnable positions or by failing to implement them effectively. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) highlighted that women frequently have less access than men to the resources needed to successfully seek a party nomination or stand in an election, often benefiting less from financial resources and political clientelism.

Intersectional Disadvantages

The challenges faced by women in politics are often compounded by other forms of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, disability, and other intersecting identities. Women from marginalized groups encounter additional barriers, such as limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, which hinder their political participation. The International Journal of Social Science and Research noted that socio-economic inequality remains a significant obstacle, as women often have limited access to education, financial resources, and professional networks.

Consequences of Underrepresentation

The underrepresentation of women in political decision-making has profound implications for governance and policy outcomes. Research indicates that the presence of women in political offices leads to more inclusive and equitable policies, particularly in areas such as healthcare, education, and social welfare. Conversely, the lack of women's perspectives can result in policies that do not adequately address the needs of half the population. The United Nations has emphasized that advancing women's participation in decision-making is crucial for the future of democracy and peaceful societies, highlighting the importance of electing more women to strengthen democratic institutions.

Conclusion

The review of trends, barriers, and challenges in women's political participation reveals a complex interplay of structural, cultural, economic, and institutional factors. While women's representation has improved in some regions due to quotas, awareness campaigns, and advocacy, significant gaps remain, particularly in patriarchal and resource-constrained contexts. Empirical evidence demonstrates that inclusive political systems benefit not only women but society as a whole, contributing to more equitable policy outcomes, increased transparency, and enhanced democratic legitimacy (Paxton & Hughes, 2014). However, the persistence of social stereotypes, financial limitations, and political marginalization underscores the need for targeted interventions. For meaningful progress, efforts must be multi-dimensional, combining legal reforms, capacity building, economic empowerment, and cultural transformation. A proactive approach that addresses both supply-side factors (women's readiness and resources) and demand-side factors (societal acceptance and institutional support) is critical for sustainable improvements.

In conclusion, increasing women's political participation is not merely a question of numbers; it is a strategic imperative for inclusive governance, social justice, and democratic consolidation. By implementing evidence-based policies and fostering supportive environments, societies can harness the full potential of women's leadership, paving the way for more equitable and representative political systems.

Recommendations

Based on the study on "Challenges of Women's Political Participation in Nigeria: An Analysis of the Fourth Republic," the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Institutional Reforms and Quotas: To increase women's political participation, governments should implement affirmative action policies, such as gender quotas for political offices. Evidence from countries like Rwanda and Sweden indicates that legal mandates significantly improve women's representation in parliaments and local councils (Krook, 2017). Quotas should not only exist on paper but be actively enforced, with penalties for non-compliance and mechanisms to support candidates' campaign resources.

2. Capacity Building and Political Education: Women often face barriers due to limited access to political training and leadership programs. Initiatives that provide mentorship, training, and workshops can equip aspiring female politicians with skills in public speaking, policy analysis, and campaign management (Waylen, 2014). Universities, NGOs, and political parties should collaborate to establish leadership academies focused on empowering women.

3. Economic Empowerment Programs: Financial constraints are a major obstacle for

women in politics. Governments and civil society organizations should create funding schemes, grants, or microfinance initiatives specifically targeting women candidates. Economic empowerment strengthens not only women's ability to run campaigns but also their bargaining power within political structures (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

4. Cultural and Social Awareness Campaigns: Deep-rooted socio-cultural norms often discourage women from political participation. National awareness campaigns, media advocacy, and community dialogues can challenge stereotypes and promote gender-inclusive political culture. Religious and community leaders should be engaged to endorse women's leadership, particularly in patriarchal societies.

5. Supportive Legal Frameworks and Anti-Discrimination Policies: Comprehensive legal protections against harassment, gender-based violence, and discrimination in political spaces are crucial. Enforcing anti-harassment laws and providing safe working environments for female politicians can reduce attrition and improve retention of women in office (Tripp, 2015).

6. Enhanced Data Collection and Research: Ongoing research is essential to monitor progress in women's political participation. Governments and scholars should prioritize gender-disaggregated data, tracking both electoral outcomes and internal party dynamics. Evidence-based policies are more effective when informed by reliable statistics on barriers, successes, and gaps.

7. Strengthening Women's Networks: Women's political participation is boosted when strong networks exist for mentorship, knowledge-sharing, and mobilization. Establishing national and local women's caucuses within political parties encourages collaboration and collective advocacy, helping women navigate structural barriers and gain political visibility.

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