DEMOCRACY AND WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS OF SUBSTANTIVE REPRESENTATION IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, 2015–2023

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Abstract

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, women's representation in the National Assembly has remained disproportionately low despite numerous democratic and gender equality commitments. Out of 469 legislative seats, only 157 have been occupied by women compared to 2,657 held by men between 1999 and 2023. The 2023 general elections further deepened this gap, with only 4 women elected as senators and 15 as members of the House of Representatives. Anchored on Liberal Democratic Theory and Feminist Political Theory, this qualitative study draws on secondary data from scholarly works, official reports, and media publications to examine trends in women's representation across the 8th, 9th, and 10th National Assemblies (2015–2023). The findings reveal persistent gender disparity and stagnation in women's descriptive representation despite policy advocacy and affirmative initiatives. Structural, institutional, and sociocultural barriers such as party nomination hurdles, financial constraints, and weak enforcement of gender policies continue to limit women's inclusion in legislative politics. The analysis demonstrates that Nigeria's democratic framework has not translated its ideals of equality into practice, thereby constraining women's substantive representation and participation in governance. The study deepens understanding of how institutional and patriarchal barriers undermine gender inclusivity within Nigeria's democratic

structures.
It recommends comprehensive electoral reforms, affirmative action legislation, and gender-responsive political strategies to strengthen women's participation and advance an inclusive, representative democracy.

Introduction

Political representation is fundamental to democratic governance. It ensures that the varied voices of citizens are acknowledged, their interests expressed, and their policy preferences integrated into decision-making processes. Democracy inherently flourishes via inclusivity and the fair involvement of all social groups in the governance framework. Nevertheless, despite the widespread endorsement of this democratic principle, the international political arena exhibits enduring gender inequalities, especially in legislative representation. Despite the implementation of gender-sensitive reforms and affirmative action programs in various nations to enhance women's political involvement, success is inconsistent across different regions (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Krook, 2010). Although nations like Rwanda, South Africa, and Senegal have attained significant female participation in their parliaments, others, such Nigeria, persist in confronting deep-rooted gender disparities despite global pledges to gender equality.

Internationally, academic discussions have developed about two principal aspects of women's representation: descriptive and substantive. Descriptive representation pertains to the quantitative presence of women in elected and appointed positions, whereas substantive representation emphasises the degree to which women in politics promote gender-sensitive legislation and advocate for women's interests (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995; Dahlerup, 1988). The latter has acquired popularity in feminist and democratic discourses as it examines the quality and impact of women's engagement, transcending simply numerical representation. Despite the substantial corpus of literature, a fundamental paradox endures: even with an increase in women's numerical representation, their substantive influence frequently remains little (Celis et al., 2008; Lovenduski, 2005).

This contradiction constitutes a component of the conceptual struggle that persists in shaping worldwide discussions on gender and democratic representation.
In the African setting, literature has recorded substantial advancements in women's political engagement during the 1990s, with numerous nations implementing constitutional quotas and gender-sensitive election procedures (Tripp, 2015; Bauer, 2012). Nonetheless, regional advancement remains inconsistent. Rwanda, Ethiopia, and South Africa exemplify transformative inclusion, mostly due to intentional policy frameworks that institutionalised women's representation. In contrast, development in West Africa, particularly Nigeria, has been limited, with women's involvement rates still among the lowest in sub-Saharan Africa (Adeniran & Momoh, 2019; Orji &Agbanyim, 2018). Current literature identifies a combination of structural, cultural, institutional, and economical obstacles that restrict women's access to political power (Anifowose, 2004; Okeke-Ihejirika &

Franceschet, 2002). Nevertheless, although numerous studies have analysed the descriptive under-representation of women, fewer have rigorously explored the substantive aspect of their involvement, namely how women legislators affect policymaking, shape discourse, and advocate for gendered interests within Nigeria's National Assembly.

In the Nigerian political discourse, scholars have continuously observed the ongoing under-representation of women since the reestablishment of civil governance in 1999 (Eke, 2022; Fayomi& Ajayi, 2015; Lewu, 2005). Despite comprising roughly 49.45% of the population (World Bank, 2023), women have less than 7% of the seats in the National Assembly. This percentage significantly underperforms the 30% representation advocated by the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the 35% objective suggested by Nigeria's 2006 National Gender Policy. Empirical data reveal that from 1999 to 2023, merely 157 women have been elected to the 469-member National Assembly, comprising 38 senators and 119 members, in contrast to almost 2,600 men (Eke, 2022). This gender disparity prompts enquiries on the essence of Nigeria's democratic evolution and the inclusivity of its representative bodies. Notwithstanding gradual advocacy and policy declarations, the disparity between policy aspirations and political realities persists significantly.
The literature on women and politics in Nigeria has examined various themes, including the historical marginalisation of women from formal politics (Anifowose, 2004), socio-cultural obstacles (Lewu, 2005), the effects of political violence (Fayomi& Ajayi, 2015), and the economic and institutional constraints hindering women's candidature (Okoronkwo-Chukwu, 2013). Nonetheless, these studies predominantly focus on the obstacles to admission rather than the quality of participation of women who successfully obtain legislative positions. Even fewer studies examine how women legislators communicate gender-specific problems or impact policy results within the framework of Nigeria's Fourth Republic. This disparity is particularly noteworthy as democratic consolidation relies not only on the numerical involvement of women but also on their efficacy in influencing the legislative agenda, policy development, and oversight responsibilities. This study aims to address the empirical and analytical gap by examining the substantive representation of women lawmakers and their contributions to legislative processes in Nigeria's National Assembly from 2015 to 2023. This study examines women's actions post-election, focusing on their legislative behaviour, agenda-setting influence, and the degree to which their presence results in concrete gender-sensitive outcomes, in contrast to prior analyses that solely address numerical decline or political participation challenges. This transition elevates the discourse from mere description to substantial analysis, shifting focus from quantifying women to assessing their influence.

This paper argues that, in addition to external issues such as sexism, political violence, and party gate keeping, the enduring gender imbalance in political representation is also a consequence of institutional inertia within Nigeria's legislative framework. Party frameworks, nomination processes, campaign funding, and the lack of statutory gender quotas impose systemic limitations that hinder women's enduring presence and efficacy. The paper analyses these institutional limitations not only as sociological phenomena but also as democratic weaknesses that compromise Nigeria's representational legitimacy. The analysis is grounded in feminist political theory, which asserts that female power dynamics

influence political institutions and results (Bryson, 2003; Zalewski, 2000). It embraces the concept that representation should be assessed not solely by presence but also by voice and impact. This study examines the works of Lovenduski (2000), Phillips (1995), and Dahlerup (1988), who contend that authentic democracy necessitates both equitable access and the reformation of political structures to integrate gendered viewpoints. This research perceives women's under-representation in the National Assembly as both a manifestation and a catalyst of Nigeria's democratic deficit, as it signifies the system's exclusionary characteristics and perpetuates inequitable policymaking that does not represent the experiences of half the population.

This paper's primary research question is: To what extent have women in Nigeria's National Assembly from 2015 to 2023 participated in substantive representation, and what institutional and socio-political factors influence their effectiveness? This research contributes to the expanding literature on gender and democracy in Africa by integrating quantitative trends in representationwith qualitative insights into legislative behaviour and policy impact. In conclusion, whereas much literature has recorded the marginalisation of women in Nigerian politics, limited research has investigated the dynamics of their substantive participation in parliament over time. This study thus diverges from previous research by examining women's representation not solely in quantitative terms, but in relation to legislative impact, policy advocacy, and institutional change. It asserts that enhancing women's political inclusion necessitates a twofold strategy: tackling structural impediments to entry and creating the institutional conditions that allow women legislators to exert significant influence. This study positions women's representation as a vital indicator of democratic advancement in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Research Problem

Notwithstanding Nigeria's democratic development since 1999 and the formal acknowledgement of gender equality via the Beijing Platform for Action and National Gender Policy, women's participation in the National Assembly remains exceedingly low. The ongoing reduction in women's legislative positions from 2015 to 2023 highlights a significant disparity between policy pledges and political circumstances. Although many studies have examined women's political engagement in general, there is a paucity of research on substantive representation, specifically the degree to which elected women affect legislative results, policy agendas, and gender-sensitive governance. Additionally, institutional obstacles including patriarchal political frameworks, inadequate implementation of gender regulations, budgetary limitations, and male-dominated party systems persist in hindering women's engagement. This study aims to address this gap by rigorously analysing the trend and characteristics of women's substantive participation in Nigeria's National Assembly from 2015 to 2023, evaluating both the patterns of inclusion and the structural obstacles impeding gender-balanced democracy.

Research Objectives

This study seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

i. To examine the extent that women in Nigeria’s National Assembly between 2015 and 2023 engaged in substantive representation

ii. To analyze the institutional and socio-political factors shape their effectiveness

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design. Data were mostly sourced from secondary materials, including official publications from the National Assembly, election reports by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), policy documents including the National Gender Policy, and academic works by Nigerian and international scholars. Descriptive and analytical methodologies were utilised to examine developments in women's political representation, emphasising their numerical presence, legislative functions, and policy impact during the 8th, 9th, and 10th Assemblies (2015–2023). The research utilised content analysis of speeches, legislative debates, and gender advocacy papers to evaluate substantive representation. The research integrates statistical data with interpretive analysis to elucidate the contextual knowledge of gender imbalance in Nigeria's legislative politics and its consequences for democratic consolidation.

Feminist theory

This study employed fundamental feminist theory to illuminate the issue of women's representation in politics and its trends. Feminist theory posits that the gender-power order is perpetually embedded in society, influencing institutions and defining contemporary power dynamics. The foundation of this theoretical framework is the fundamentals of feminist theory. MarysiaZalewski asserts that it seems all feminists concur that varying societal advantages and disadvantages are contingent upon one's assigned sex at birth (Zalewski 2000:97). A fundamental aspect of feminist political theory is the assertion that women and their circumstances are crucial to political analysis. The focus is on interrogating the disparity in power and privilege between men and women and exploring potential avenues for change (Bryson 2003:1). Gender in politics encompasses two dimensions, which, while distinct, are interconnected. One pertains to women's representation, while the other addresses concerns regarding women's difficulties. Representation enhances the probability of addressing women's issues and introduces a gender viewpoint; yet, representation alone cannot ensure the intended results (Sumbadze 2008:33). Gender denotes the roles, relationships, attitudes, behaviours, and values that society attributes to men and women. The recent emphasis on gender relations is largely attributable to the impact of feminism. Feminists universally define gender relations as issues of subordination and inequality (Waylen 1996:6). A key aspect of the feminist perspective on women's representation in politics is that variations among women, including class, ethnicity, race, and generation, significantly influence their interests and priorities (Lovenduski 2002: Introduction). Significant distinctions among women must not be overlooked, but the disparity between men and women also plays a crucial role in the politics of representation.

Several prevailing views regarding the under-representation of women in politics will be examined. Clark presents some prevalent perspectives regarding the inadequate representation within feminist thought. Sex-role socialisation is a factor analogous to the gender role structure and relations identified as the cause. Women and men are instructed in distinct societal roles, with domestic responsibilities assigned to women and politics and public life

perceived as the domain of males. Another aspect of this gender role issue is that domestic duties and familial responsibilities impede women's participation in politics and public life. She references a male conspiracy hypothesis rooted in feminist ideology, positing that men discriminate against women, resulting in their under-representation in political power. She maintains that institutional limits result in women being less likely than men to attain incumbency, hence diminishing their opportunities to secure office. She finds that the power, prestige, and desirability of political office are factors influencing the representation of women, as these attributes are perceived as male-dominated, creating significant challenges for women in competing with men (Clark 1991:70-75).

There are primarily two distinct approaches to addressing the decline in women's representation, which results in their under-representation in politics: some studies advocate for a requisite number of female representatives (descriptive representation), termed the critical mass, while others emphasise the significance of a select group of female politicians who actively promote gender equality issues (substantive representation). Opinions differ over the percentage of women that represents a critical mass, ranging from 10% to 35%, depending on the researcher (Lovenduski 2001, Dahlerup 1988). Laurel Weldon is a scholar who considers certain women politicians, who actively advocate for gender equality, to be more significant than mere numerical female representation, in contrast to those who conform to male-dominated norms (Weldon 2002). Descriptive representation theories contend that the exclusion of any group from power can skew policy decisions and political results (Clark 1991, In Lovenduski 2000:2).

Substantive representation pertains to the extent of influence wielded by women in political office. Despite achieving greater numerical representation, it is not guaranteed that women's thoughts and interests are being duly acknowledged. DrudeDahlerup examines the concept of critical mass, positing that a requisite proportion of women, such as 30%, is necessary for them to effectuate meaningful change in politics. Dahlerup posits that an increasing representation of women in politics would result in a reduction of gender stereotypes. Childs and Krook (2008) assert that the reduction in the stereotyping of women is attributable to the heightened representation of women, as a greater diversity of women engages in the political sphere. Clark asserts that a scarcity of female office holders results in a dearth of female role models and limited possibilities for women to acquire political experience (1991: In Lovenduski 2000:65).

Conceptual Clarification

Politics and Substantive Representation

Politics, as originally articulated by Aristotle, is the "master science" focused on the attainment of the common good. In reality, the phrase has come to denote the contest for power, resource control, and the rivalry for legitimacy among social actors. In Nigeria, politics is frequently influenced by patriarchal norms, monetisation, and patron-client dynamics that marginalise women's meaningful involvement. This exclusion, frequently justified by cultural and structural considerations, exposes profound conflicts within the essence of representation. Pitkin's (1967) traditional taxonomy of representationformalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive—establishes the basis for comprehending political inclusion. Nonetheless, whereas Pitkin asserted that substantive representation entails acting in the interests of

the represented, later African feminist scholars have challenged the notion that representation devoid of agency can really be considered substantive. Tamale (2000) contends that even when women hold positions in parliaments, they frequently operate within patriarchal legislative systems that limit gender activism. This viewpoint is essential, although it may exaggerate structural factors while minimising women's strategic autonomy in effecting institutional change from within. Goetz (2003) enhanced this critique by underscoring the necessity to assess "the quality of women's representation," rather than only their quantity.

However, Goetz's theory, although analytically robust, presupposes a relatively stable institutional environmentan assumption that may not be applicable in Nigeria's tumultuous democracy, where institutional fragility and elite capture compromise legislative efficacy. Consequently, the Nigerian situation necessitates a reframing of substantive representation that beyond mere legislative presence or numerical inclusion, incorporating the contextual dynamics of political agency, resilience, and negotiation within gendered institutions. Phillips (1995) posited that the descriptive depiction of women in politics establishes a basis for substantive results. Nevertheless, empirical evidence from Nigeria refutes this linear assumption. Despite the prominent exposure of female parliamentarians, gender-sensitive legislation, such as the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill (GEO Bill), has consistently failed, indicating that mere descriptive representation does not necessarily lead to substantive change. The Nigerian experience reveals a disparity between theoretical aspirations and political realities, wherein patriarchal party structures, financial exclusion, and socio-cultural prejudices influence women's political agency.

Research by Tripp (2015) on women's legislative participation in sub-Saharan Africa illustrates that quota systems have increased women's representation, yet have not significantly augmented their policy influence. Nigeria's situation differs: instead of implementing quota-based institutional assurances, the state depends on non-binding party commitments that lack enforcement mechanisms. This distinction is vital; it emphasises that structural reforms, in the absence of political will and cultural transformation, merely entrench tokenism instead of fostering authentic representation. The research consistently indicates that most studies focus on representation as either presence or outcome, while few examine representation as a process, specifically the continuous negotiation between gendered power dynamics and institutional opportunity frameworks. This conceptual disparity serves as the foundation for the intervention of this investigation. This research analyses women's roles in Nigeria's National Assembly from 2015 to 2023, moving beyond mere numerical assessment to explore how women wield legislative power within patriarchal limitations, thus enhancing the discussion on substantive representation in Africa's emerging democracies.

The political representation and engagement of women are crucial for sustaining the stability and legitimacy of any political system (Fayomi& Ajayi, 2015). Agbaje (1999:193) asserts that women's political engagement is an essential principle of a democratic society. It is the essential condition of democracy, since it entails a dedication to providing equal opportunities for both men and women to cultivate their individual abilities (Anifowose, 2004:205). Consequently, democracy is unimaginable without political engagement

(Agbaje, 1999:193). According to Fayomi& Ajayi (2015:12), in every community, those in political power are particularly focused on facilitating a degree of political involvement among the populace. Political involvement refers to the degree to which individual members of society engage, contribute to, or immerse themselves in the societal framework (Agbaje, 1999:193). Fayomi and Ajayi (2015:13) claim that the critical role of political participation means its denial to a significant portion of the public can lead to an explosive situation.

Thus, the political influence of women or any societal group is directly correlated to their level of engagement in the political processes of that society (Lewu, 2005:63). Democracy and representation are intrinsically linked; indeed, democracy is defined by representation. Effective political representation reflects the essence of democracy. In contemporary democratic thought, political representation has gained prominence due to two principal considerations. The initial factor is the discord between conventional concepts of representative democracy, which primarily emphasise territorial voting representation, and the evolving political landscape characterised by heightened complexity, pluralism, and dependence on informal discourse and deliberations to confer political legitimacy (Warren & Urbinati, 2008). Democracy is a governing system that promotes active political participation from all societal groups. It advocates for equitable opportunities for both men and women to engage in political processes and encourages participation from individuals across all sectors of society in shaping the nation's leadership. Democracy is universally recognised as the only legitimate form of governance that guarantees fair and impartial administration for all genders, eradicating any biases or preferences. Sunday, 2013. Inclusive representation encompassing many ethnicities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic backgrounds is essential for a robust and flourishing democracy (Teen Vogue, 2020). Proper representation fortifies the foundations of democracy. The realisation of democracy necessitates an authentic collaboration between men and women in managing societal matters, where they engage in equality and complementarity, deriving reciprocal enrichment from their distinctions (Inter-Parliamentary Union 1997).

Arguments for Gender-Balanced Representation

Gender equality and women's political participation extend beyond mere academic inquiry. It encompasses numerous equally significant facets in the political and social domains for all individuals. The primary contention concerns core democratic rights, including the equal entitlement and opportunity for all individuals to run for office and wield political authority. A substantial portion of aid is allocated to democracy promotion, which aims to enhance women's political power and involvement. Various initiatives focus on educating women about political matters, equipping them to become candidates for local governance and enhancing their influence in politics (e.g., Women's Political Resource Centre (WPRC)). It is essential to investigate the obstacles to women's participation related to the specified projects, as a comprehensive understanding of women's access to politics is necessary for efforts to enhance female representation to yield effective outcomes. While increasing female representation in politics is a significant accomplishment, the examination of their roles and opportunities within this sphere requires greater scrutiny.

Eke (2022) cites Lovenduski in the introductory chapter of Feminism and Politics (2000), highlighting various arguments for enhanced female representation: normative arguments asserting the inequity of male monopolisation of representation, and pragmatic arguments emphasising that women's unique interests and experiences can only be adequately represented by women. Lovenduski asserts that the normative and pragmatic arguments do not claim that increasing female representation in politics will influence political outcomes. The third argument, conversely, posits that increasing female representation in politics will enhance political outcomes (Lovenduski, 2000).

The analysis of under-representation as an issue in political science begins with the arguments of Anne Phillips. She posits that social background and opinion representation should remain interconnected, asserting that the over-representation of a certain social group results in the over-representation of their opinions (Phillips 1995). She presents the subsequent rationale:

The most immediately compelling of the remaining arguments is that which presents gender parity as a straightforward matter of justice: that it is patently and grotesquely unfair for men to monopolize representation. If there were no obstacles operating to keep certain groups of people out of political life, we would expect positions of political influence to be randomly distributed between the sexes. There might be some minor and innocent deviations, but any more distorted distribution is evidence of intentional or structural discrimination. In such contexts (that is, most contexts) women are being denied rights and opportunities that are currently available to men (Phillips 1995: 63).

What Phillips (1995) points to be that under-representation of women in politics is to be viewed as structural or intentional discrimination.

Trend Clamor for the Inclusion of Women in Active Political Process and Representation.

The Nigerian government has always demonstrated its interest in the participation of women in governance prior to the period of 1999-2022. Advocacy by distinguished and reputable members of society has persistently urged successive governments to incorporate women into leadership roles inside the country. Rev. Fr. Onoyima (1986) asserted that granting women the opportunity to engage in politics is tantamount to acknowledging their existence and role in society. Women are reluctant to relinquish their status and may make compromises to attain what they value most due to their numerical strength. He asserted that women are knowledgeable, patient, astute, and serve as essential negotiators who value discussion.

Maryam Babangida (1992), former First Lady, asserted in her talk that women's demand for enhanced and substantive engagement in politics fundamentally arises from the democratic ideal of equality among individuals. Mustapha (1990) urged various state governments to acknowledge women's involvement in politics, asserting that such recognition would facilitate equitable policy development devoid of bias.The imperative for women's active participation in politics is a significant objective for African nations, with Nigeria demonstrating leadership in this regard. In his 1989 article, "Women: Backbone of Society," Ogundile enumerated the various activities in which Nigerian women have engaged to integrate into the Nigerian political system. He referenced several feminist organisations and initiatives established by

women, including the National Council for Women Societies, Women in Nigeria, the Federation of Muslim Women Associations, the Better Life Programme, the Family Support Programme, and the Economic Advancement Programme, among others.

Ene (1997) provided a concise overview of the initiatives and scheduled programs of the Better Life for Rural Women (BLP). The objective of the program, as stated by Ene, was to effectively foster a deliberate awareness of the significance of women in national development initiatives, particularly for rural inhabitants. There has been a demand for all governing bodies to revise their current constitutions to rectify the inherent gender imbalance. The change will facilitate the implementation of affirmative action regarding women's involvement in the nation's political process.

Nigerian women are hence urged to consider their active involvement in Nigerian politics as pertinent and essential at this juncture. The adequate involvement of women in all areas of development is increasingly acknowledged as both a prerequisite and an indicator of success in achieving sustainable human development. Consequently, UNICEF (1993) asserted that women's engagement in all tiers of development must be addressed through fundamental welfare services, resource accessibility, awareness, and the exercise of power and participation. Oji (2002) noted that the peril of women's social isolation from political and other communal activities is their inability to contribute to the growth of society. Dibia (2004) emphasised the necessity for authorities to alleviate the barriers hindering women's advancement to parity with men in Nigeria. He argued that, despite the historical constraints on women's political participation, it would be beneficial for Africans to disregard such history and tradition, thereby integrating women equally with men in all developmental endeavours.

He described the government's approach to gender inequalities as "Gender Typing," which will hinder the nation's industrialisation objectives. Considering Nigeria's significant economic and political challenges, it is increasingly evident that stifling women's abilities and skills to safeguard men's privileges is a substantial waste of human resources that the nation can no longer sustain. The notion that women possess lesser interest and insufficient knowledge of politics compared to men is erroneous; this assumption fails to accurately reflect the sentiments of the majority of women who are significantly engaged in the nation's political affairs.
The World Bank (2000 gender analysis) stated, "when women are not afforded equal opportunities with their male counterparts, there is a risk that certain skills within a nation will be squandered." To avert this detrimental outcome, Dibia (2004) advocated for increased political pressure on multinational corporations and governments to ensure that women's interests are not overlooked. Nigeria will fail to attain its development objectives if the full humanity and citizenship of women are not recognised and robustly safeguarded.

Trends in Women's Political Representation and Current Realities
In the last two decades, women's political representation has significantly increased globally. Worldwide, the participation rate of women in national parliaments has increased twofold throughout this period, with notable advancements across all regions towards the goal of 30 percent women's involvement in decision-making roles (Orji et al., 2018). Orji & Agbanyim (2018) emphasised that Sub-Saharan Africa has had the most accelerated growth in women's political representation relative to any

other global area. African nations exhibit varied advancements in women's political representation, with countries such as Rwanda and Ethiopia seeing notable growth in women's participation. This contrasts with other nations, such as Nigeria, who have achieved minimal advancements in this area. The democratic transition in Nigeria in 1999 ignited optimism for a renewed commitment to gender equality and the involvement and representation of women (Udoet, 2023). The representation of women in parliament since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999 has generated numerous enquiries and discussions. Since 1999, merely 157 women have filled seats in Nigeria's 469-member National Assembly, which includes 38 senators and 119 representatives, in contrast to 2,657 men who have held comparable positions. This indicates a persistent tendency in the under-representation of women in parliament.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussions

Table 1. Percentage and Statistical Difference in Gender Representation of Members of House of Representatives (1999-2023)

House of Representatives	Year	Total no. of seats	Men	Percentage of men	Women	Percentage of women
	1999	360	347	96.4%	13	3.6%
	2003	339	318	94%	21	6%
	2007	358	333	93.0%	25	7.0%
	2011	360	336	93.3%	24	6.7%
	2015	360	341	94.7%	19	5.3%
	2019	360	338	93.9%	22	6.1%
	2023	360	345	95.8%	15	4.2%

Table 2. Percentage and Statistical Difference in Gender Representation of Senators (1999-2023)

House of Senate	Year	Total no. of seats	Men	Percentage of men	Women	Percentage of women
	1999	109	106	97.2%	3	2.8%
	2003	109	105	96.3%	4	3.7%
	2007	109	100	91.7%	9	8.3%
	2011	109	102	93.6%	7	6.4%
	2015	109	101	92.7%	8	7.3%
	2019	106*	97	91.5%	9	8.5%
	2023	109	105	96.3	4	3.7%

Source: Table 1&2 compiled with data extracted from The Nigeria CEDAW NGO coalition shadow (2008); Sunday &Iteogu, pg. 220-224 (2021); IPU Parline-Global data on National Parliaments (2025), and author's extension.

According to the analysis above (Table 1-2), the findings reflect that between 2015 and 2019, women in the House increased marginally from 5.3% to 6.1%, but then dropped to 4.2% in 2023. In the Senate, women held 7.3% in 2015, 8.5% in 2019, then sharply fell to 3.7% in 2023. Overall, across both chambers, the numerical presence of women remains extremely low, seldom reaching double-digits percentage. From a substantive-representation viewpoint, this low descriptive base limits the potential for strong influence simply because the pool of women legislators is so small (echoing the "critical mass" thesis). The 2023 drop is particularly concerning: fewer women legislating means fewer opportunities for agenda-setting, oversight, and gender-responsive lawmaking.As for the Senate, women represented 2.8% in 1999 with men making up 97.2%. In 2003, women accounted for 3.7%, and men represented 96.3% Additionally, Benue's State first female speaker was abruptly ousted from her position through impeachment. In 2007, female senators were nine, and in the House of Reps, only 25 while there were 335 males. By 2011, there was a marginal decrease as the number of female members in the House of Representatives dropped to 24, while there were 336 males, and seven (7) females became senators. In 2007, women comprised 6.9% of the House of Representatives, whereas men accounted for 93.1%. In 2011, women constituted 6.7% of the representation, while men comprised 93.3%. As for the Senate, women represented 8.3% in 2007, while men constituted 91.7%. In 2011, women accounted for 6.4%, and men represented 93.6%.

In 2015, there were only 8 female senators, and in the House of Reps, only 19 females were elected while there were 341 males. In 2019, the number of female members in the House of Representatives grew to 22, while there were 338 males and 9 females who became senators. Women comprised 5.3% of the House of Representatives, whereas men accounted for 96.7%. In 2019, women constituted 6.1% of the representation, while men comprised 93.9%. As for the Senate, women represented 7.3% in 2015, while men constituted 92.7%. In 2019, women accounted for 8.5%, and men represented 91.5%. In 2023, women comprise 4.2% of the Houses of Representatives, whereas men account for 95.8%. As for the Senate, women represent 3.7% in 2023, while men constitute 96.3%. This analysis shows a continuous trend of women's underrepresentation in Nigerian parliament.

Findings:

A Daily Trust article indicates that during the 9th Senate (2019-2023), a total of 753 legislation were introduced; two female Senators, Stella Oduah and Uche Lilian Ekwunife, were prominent sponsors, with 36 and 22 measures respectively. (Daily Trust, 2023) Secondly, at the state level for the 10th National Assembly (2023-27), in Imo State, the only female House member, Mariam Onuaha, sponsored 23 legislation in her inaugural year, the highest among her colleagues in that state. Qualitative analysis indicates that while certain women sponsor bills or motions, the predominant sponsorship of gender-equality and inclusion legislation remains with male legislators, highlighting institutional limitations. (Daily Trust, 2025)Legislative bills designed to enhance women's representation, such as the Special Seats/Reserved Seats Bill, are currently

stalled in committee or have not been enacted, indicating the limitations of institutional efficacy regarding women's substantive initiatives.

The inadequate descriptive representation results in a structural deficit: due to women being a smaller demographic, their ability to organise, lead committees, or impact majority leadership is constrained. This constrains the ability for substantive representation. The research indicates that individual women lawmakers can achieve significant impact (e.g., high sponsorship counts), although their efforts frequently remain isolated rather than being integrated into structured and institutional frameworks. The legislative culture, characterised by male dominance, patron-client politics, and monetised nominations, further undermines substantive representation; even with women's active participation, the overarching system constrains their impact. The enduring nature of gendered legislative results (few women-authored laws, sluggish advancement of women-focused bills) indicates that Nigeria's democratic representation is hindered not only by numerical disparities but also by power dynamics and institutional frameworks. Consequently, the disparity between descriptive and substantive representation persists significantly in the Nigerian context from 2015 to 2023: mere presence does not consistently engender influence, due to structural and institutional impediments.

Conclusion

From 2015 to 2023, Nigeria's National Assembly regressed in terms of gender inclusion. The 8th Assembly commenced with modest representation (7 female senators and 22 female representatives), the 9th Assembly decreased to 8 and 13, and the 2023 elections yielded the lowest baseline to date, with merely three women elected to the Senate and around seventeen to the House. Minor modifications resulting from judicial decisions and by-elections did not change the overall structure. The implication for Nigeria's democracy is clear: demographic legitimacy does not operate automatically. Absent modifications to nomination processes, financial regulations, and election frameworks, incremental lobbying will not result in securing seats. The setback presents an opportunity, since the public discourse initiated by the declines in 2019 and 2023 has brought measures such as special seats and enhanced party commitments into the forefront of constitutional and electoral change.

If Nigeria combines such legal mechanisms with practical support to mitigate risks for women candidates and enhance the quality of primaries, the forthcoming electoral cycles need not replicate the trends of 2015–2023. Inclusive representation is not an act of charity; it is a democratic need that enhances legislative efficacy, optimises policy results, and upholds the fundamental commitment of the republic that every Nigerian possesses a significant voice in the laws that govern them. The Nigerian government has not yet fully complied with the declaration from the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, which advocated for 30% affirmative action, nor with the National Gender Policy (NGP) recommendation of 35% affirmative action to ensure greater representation of women in both elective and appointive positions. Nigerian women continue to be marginalised due to the prevailing leadership style in the country. Despite the challenges confronting women, action and advocacy, women's education, governmental support for empowerment, and women's desire in political participation are generating significant positive momentum. This signifies a promising future for women's representation in

the national parliament and their involvement in politics. Consequently, pertinent stakeholders are urged to champion the safeguarding of women against abuse, enhance their economic and political empowerment, and reassess the requisite legislation to support the increasing involvement of women in both elected and appointed political roles.

Recommendations

Institutional and Legal Reforms for Gender Inclusion: To address the enduring gender disparity in Nigeria's National Assembly, it is imperative to implement constitutional and legislative reforms that establish gender quotas. This entails implementing the 35% affirmative action concept specified in the National Gender Policy and legislating the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill (GEO Bill). Political parties must to be required to allocate a minimum percentage of elective and appointive positions for women in both internal nominations and general elections. This legal support will elevate women's representation from a mere symbolic act to an essential democratic obligation.

Enhancing Women's Political Competence and Support Frameworks: In addition to legal reforms, intentional investment in capacity-building initiatives for both aspiring and elected female politicians is crucial. This encompasses mentorship programs, campaign funding assistance, leadership development, and safeguards against gender-based political violence. Cooperation among government entities, civil society organisations, and development partners can furnish institutional and financial resources to bolster women's competitiveness in Nigeria's monetised political landscape.

Transforming Party and Legislative Culture: Political parties continue to serve as the primary gatekeepers to representation. Consequently, internal party democracy requires change to eliminate patriarchal gatekeeping and provide transparent, meritocratic candidate selection processes. Institutional structures inside the legislature, such women's caucuses, gender-sensitive committees, and gender budgeting frameworks, should be reinforced to enhance women's substantive impact. These steps will guarantee that female lawmakers acquire influence and hold the institutional authority to promote gender-responsive policymaking and cultivate inclusive democratic government.

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