

GENDER EQUITY AND WOMEN UNDERREPRESENTATION IN POLITICS IN OYO STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The underrepresentation of women in politics is a significant issue that affects governance and societal development. This study examines the historical and persistent challenges women face in achieving equitable political representation, particularly in Nigeria, where patriarchal traditions have long marginalized women. The emergence of the Nigerian women's movement and the establishment of key policies like the National Gender Policy are important milestones, yet significant obstacles remain. The study highlights the need to address these challenges to ensure that women can actively contribute to political processes and influence the nation's future. The study is anchored on feminist political theory and In-Depth interviews and questionnaire were the instruments used to collect the data. The findings of the study show that structural barriers such as financial constraints, socio-cultural expectations, and political party dynamics are limiting women. The results indicate that while progress has been made in increasing awareness of women's political rights and representation, systemic barriers persist. Cultural norms continue to reinforce the idea that politics is a male-dominated field, discouraging many women from pursuing leadership roles. Economic constraints further compound the problem, as political campaigns require significant financial backing, which many women lack. Additionally, the exclusionary structures within

Introduction

The foundation of effective governance rests on the equitable representation of all societal groups, with women's active participation in politics being not just desirable but indispensable. In Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and its largest economy, the underrepresentation of women in political spheres remains a pressing issue, despite growing recognition of their critical role. This gap hinders governance and stalls societal progress, underscoring the urgent need for change. Historically, Nigeria's patriarchal traditions have marginalized women in political processes. During the colonial era and the early years of independence, women were largely excluded from decision-making spaces. These cultural norms relegated women to domestic roles, limiting their influence in shaping the nation's trajectory. Yet, the 1970s marked a turning point with the rise of a dynamic women's

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political parties make it difficult for women to secure meaningful leadership positions, limiting their influence in decision-making processes. Addressing these barriers will require a collaborative effort from government institutions, political parties, civil society organizations, and local communities. Ultimately, achieving greater gender parity in politics is not just about fairness; it is about fostering a more inclusive and representative democracy. A political landscape that actively includes women leads to better governance, more balanced policy-making, and a society where every voice regardless of gender has an equal opportunity to be heard.

Keywords: Gender equity, women's political participation, Nigeria, patriarchal structures, political empowerment, affirmative action, women's rights, social development.

movement that began challenging these entrenched barriers. This movement tirelessly advocated for women's rights and their inclusion in political life, emphasizing that diverse voices are essential for a thriving democracy.

Significant milestones reflect this struggle. The establishment of the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS) in 1959 laid early groundwork for organizing women's advocacy. Later, the adoption of the National Gender Policy in 1995 set a framework for promoting gender equality and empowering women across all sectors. These efforts signaled a commitment to dismantling systemic barriers and fostering an environment where women could contribute meaningfully to governance. Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, progress has been evident. More women have secured elected and appointed positions, reflecting gradual shifts in attitudes and policies. High-profile appointments and electoral victories have showcased women's capabilities in leadership roles, inspiring younger generations. However, these gains remain modest against the scale of the challenge. The ambitious target of 35% affirmative action for women's representation, a benchmark set to ensure equitable participation, continues to elude the nation. Women still occupy a fraction of political offices, with their voices often drowned out in male-dominated arenas.

The barriers to women's political participation are multifaceted. Cultural norms that prioritize male leadership persist, discouraging women from pursuing or being supported in political ambitions. Economic constraints also play a role, as political campaigns require significant resources that many women lack access to. Additionally, the absence of robust institutional mechanisms to enforce gender quotas undermines efforts to close the representation gap. These challenges are compounded by societal attitudes that question women's leadership abilities, further entrenching their exclusion. Despite these obstacles, the case for women's inclusion in politics is compelling. Women bring unique perspectives that enrich policy-making, addressing issues like education, healthcare and social welfare with nuanced understanding. Their participation strengthens democratic legitimacy, ensuring governance reflects the needs of all citizens. Moreover, empowering women politically has a ripple effect, fostering economic growth and social cohesion by challenging gender inequities across sectors.

Statement of the Problem

The historical dominance of patriarchal structures in Nigeria has profoundly constrained women's participation in politics (Okonkwo, I. D. (2025). Despite the undeniable progress achieved in recent years, women continue to be significantly underrepresented and face a multitude of challenges that impede their full and effective engagement (Udoh, I. E., Udoh, O. P., Onebunne, A. P., Balouboye, M. E., Oboh, S., & Nosakhare, I. N. 2025). These challenges include:

- A lack of adequate support from political parties, which often fail to provide women with the necessary resources and opportunities.
- Financial constraints, which can pose a significant barrier to women seeking to contest elections or participate in political activities (Ette, M., & Akpan-Obong, P. 2023).
- Limited avenues for advancement within political parties, hindering women's ability to rise through the ranks and assume leadership positions (Adenekan, A. O. (2022).
- The prevalence of sexual harassment and violence, which creates a hostile and discouraging environment for women in politics.

These persistent issues collectively undermine women's ability to participate fully and effectively in the political life of the nation. Thus, the study explores gender inequality and women underrepresentation in politics in Oyo state.

Objectives

- i. To examine the ways in which prevailing cultural norms and societal expectations contribute to the perpetuation of gender-based violence and discrimination against women in the political sphere.
- ii. To assess the effectiveness of existing policies and legal frameworks that are intended to promote and enhance women's political participation.
- iii. To analyze the impact of women's underrepresentation in politics on the quality of governance and the health of democracy in Oyo State.

Significance of the Study

This research is vital, illuminating the path toward women's empowerment and gender equality in Nigeria. By exposing the stark underrepresentation of women in politics and proposing actionable solutions, it paves the way for transformative change. Elevating women's voices in decision-making ensures their perspectives shape policies, fostering governance that truly reflects society's diversity. This work not only strengthens Nigeria's democratic fabric but also enriches the global conversation on women's political inclusion. Through its focus on Nigeria's unique context, it offers insights that resonate worldwide, driving progress toward a future where women's leadership is not just valued but essential.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is specifically focused on gender inequality and women underrepresentation in Oyo State, Nigeria. The research examines the period from 2011 to 2024, analyzing the challenges women face in the political arena during this timeframe and exploring strategies to overcome these obstacles.

Literature Review

This exploration delves into the intricate landscape of women's political participation, unraveling the challenges of gender inequality that persist across societies. It lays a theoretical foundation, weaving together prior research to illuminate the concepts shaping this study. Politics, at its essence, is the art of governing societies a dynamic process of decision-making, power allocation and conflict resolution over resources and influence (Peters, B. G., 2004). Far beyond elections or government halls, it is the backbone of human organization, enabling societies to establish order, set rules and pursue collective goals (Goodnow, F. J., 2017). From local communities to national stages, politics shapes how societies function and evolve, a framework where voices compete to define the future (Feiock, R. C., 2013).

Women's political participation emerges as a powerful force within this framework, yet it remains a hard-fought battle for empowerment and equality. Historically sidelined by discrimination and underrepresentation, women have tirelessly advocated for their place in political arenas (Goswami, I., Balakrishnan, S., Vinotha, C., Chopra, R., Sivakumar, V., & DM, C., 2023). Their engagement is not merely a quest for fairness but a cornerstone of sustainable development and inclusive governance. When women contribute to political discourse, their perspectives shaped by unique experiences enrich policies, yielding outcomes that resonate across society (Akinwale, A. A., 2023). Their absence, conversely, leaves governance incomplete, lacking the diversity needed to address complex societal needs effectively.

Yet, gender inequality casts a long shadow over these efforts. Defined as the uneven distribution of resources, opportunities and power between men and women, it stifles progress at every turn (Bhandari, M. P., 2023). Women face restricted access to education, employment, healthcare and decision-making roles, barriers that curtail individual potential and hinder societal growth. Deeply rooted in cultural norms and restrictive beliefs, this inequality is perpetuated by practices that marginalize women, including the alarming prevalence of violence in political spaces. Such hostility creates an intimidating environment, discouraging women from stepping into roles where their voices are desperately needed (Bazaanah, P., & Ngcobo, P., 2024). The struggle against gender inequality is not just about leveling the playing field; it is about dismantling systems that undermine justice and peace. Societal norms that prioritize male authority, coupled with inadequate institutional support, continue to limit women's political aspirations. The absence of robust mechanisms to enforce gender equity in politics further entrenches this disparity, leaving women to navigate a landscape fraught with obstacles.

This review underscores the urgency of addressing these challenges. Women's political participation is a catalyst for transformative change, fostering governance that reflects the full spectrum of societal needs. By amplifying women's voices, societies can craft policies that are more equitable and responsive, driving progress toward shared prosperity. However, achieving this vision requires confronting the entrenched inequalities that hold women back not only for their sake but for the health of entire communities. The path forward demands a reckoning with cultural and structural barriers. Empowering women in politics means challenging harmful norms, ensuring access to resources and creating safe spaces for their participation. It calls for policies that prioritize inclusion and accountability, recognizing that gender equality is not an abstract ideal but a practical necessity for thriving societies. This study, grounded in these

concepts, seeks to contribute to that vision, offering insights into how women's political engagement can reshape governance for the better.

Theoretical Framework

This study is firmly grounded in feminist political theory. These robust theoretical perspectives provide a critical lens through which to examine and deconstruct patriarchal systems, offering invaluable tools to understand and challenge the pervasive and deeply ingrained nature of gender inequalities. A central tenet of feminist political theory is the understanding that gender is not simply a biological distinction between males and females; rather, it is a complex and dynamic social construct (Bishara, D. H. 2022). This construct shapes roles, expectations and power relations between men and women within a society. Feminist political theory critically analyzes how power structures operate to maintain and perpetuate gender-based oppression across various social, economic and political spheres. It explores the multifaceted ways in which women are often marginalized, disadvantaged and excluded from full participation in society, including the critical arena of politics. Furthermore, this study incorporates the crucial concept of intersectionality (Brubaker, S. J. 2021). This approach recognizes that gender does not operate in isolation; instead, it intersects with other social identities such as race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and religion. These intersecting identities create unique and complex experiences of discrimination and inequality for women, particularly within the political arena, where power dynamics can be especially complex (Bhandari, M. P. 2023).

Empirical Review

The intricate web of factors shaping women's political participation reveals a landscape fraught with challenges, as existing research underscores. These influences, drawn from a rich body of studies, span sociocultural norms, political party dynamics, violence and policy frameworks, each playing a pivotal role in either enabling or obstructing women's political engagement.

Sociocultural barriers, deeply rooted in traditional gender roles and patriarchal systems, create formidable obstacles for women aspiring to political roles (Paxton, P., Hughes, M. M., & Barnes, T. D., 2020). These systems perpetuate the notion that politics is a male domain, casting women as outsiders. Societal expectations and attitudes often discourage women from seeking office, engaging in political discourse, or fully participating in civic processes, fostering an environment where their ambitions are stifled (Thelma, C. C., & Ngulube, L., 2024). This cultural resistance not only limits women's access to political spaces but also undermines their confidence to challenge the status quo.

Within political parties, internal structures and practices significantly shape women's opportunities for advancement. A lack of support from party leaders, coupled with limited access to leadership roles, hampers women's progress (Dolan, J., Deckman, M. M., & Swers, M. L., 2021). Discriminatory practices within these organizations further marginalize women, restricting their ability to secure influential positions or gain the visibility needed to thrive in competitive political arenas. These dynamics reveal how institutional gatekeepers can either uplift or suppress women's political aspirations. The specter of violence against women in politics casts a particularly dark shadow. Physical, psychological and sexual harassment create a hostile environment that deters women from entering or remaining in political life (Watson, R., Hammans, L., Hansby, O., Barry-Walsh, J., & Every-Palmer, S., 2025). This pervasive threat

undermines women's safety and well-being, silencing their voices and eroding their ability to participate freely. Such intimidation not only affects individual women but also sends a chilling message to others considering political engagement, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion.

Policy frameworks, while promising on paper, often fall short in practice. Measures like Nigeria's National Gender Policy aim to advance gender equality, yet their impact is curtailed by weak implementation, inadequate enforcement and insufficient resources (Fernández, R., Isakova, A., Luna, F., & Rambousek, B., 2021). Without robust accountability mechanisms, these policies struggle to dismantle systemic barriers, leaving women to navigate a political landscape where structural support remains inconsistent.

Together, these factors paint a complex picture of the challenges women face in political participation. Sociocultural norms and party dynamics restrict access, while violence creates fear and policy shortcomings fail to provide the necessary scaffolding for change. Yet, understanding these barriers offers a roadmap for progress. By confronting patriarchal attitudes, reforming party structures, ensuring safety and strengthening policy implementation, societies can foster an environment where women's political contributions flourish, enriching governance and advancing equality.

Effects of Women's Underrepresentation in Politics

The persistent and pervasive underrepresentation of women in political decision-making bodies has significant and detrimental consequences, not only for women themselves but for society as a whole: It perpetuates unequal gendered power dynamics, reinforcing the deeply ingrained and harmful notion that men are inherently the primary holders of power and influence, while simultaneously marginalizing women's voices, perspectives and contributions. This imbalance undermines the principles of democracy and equitable representation (Abbas, S. 2024). It frequently leads to the neglect or downplaying of women's unique perspectives, specific needs and valuable interests in the crucial processes of policy-making and governance. This neglect results in policies that are not fully inclusive, equitable, or responsive to the diverse needs of the population. Ultimately, it hinders the achievement of inclusive and sustainable development goals, as women's active participation and diverse perspectives are absolutely essential for creating effective, comprehensive and equitable solutions to the complex societal challenges facing communities and nations worldwide (Patel, J. 2024).

Strategies to Enhance Women's Political Representation

To effectively address the multifaceted challenges and promote greater inclusion of women in politics, a range of diverse and impactful strategies has been proposed and implemented by various stakeholders. Strengthening and rigorously enforcing existing gender quota laws and policies and developing new and more effective measures to ensure compliance and accountability. These reforms aim to create a more level playing field for women in politics, removing discriminatory barriers and promoting equal opportunity. Providing targeted financial support and dedicated resources specifically for women's political campaigns, addressing the significant financial barriers that often disproportionately hinder their participation and ability to compete effectively (Harry, B. 2024). Implementing comprehensive public education and awareness campaigns designed to challenge deeply ingrained and harmful societal norms and

stereotypes that perpetuate restrictive views about women's roles in society. These campaigns promote greater understanding and acceptance of the fundamental principles of gender equality (Smith, S. G., & Sinkford, J. C. 2022). Offering specialized leadership training, robust mentorship programs and targeted capacity-building initiatives. These programs are designed to equip aspiring female politicians with the essential skills, knowledge, networks and confidence they need to succeed in the complex and demanding world of politics (Kucici, A. M., & Buratai, H. A. (2025).

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive research design to examine women's engagement in politics and their contributions to political initiatives in Nigeria. The population of the study included: Women in elected offices. Members of NGOs and CBOs focusing on women's involvement in politics. Men and women from major political parties in Oyo state. Members from various communities and areas in Oyo state. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed, using both probability and non-probability sampling methods. Purposive sampling was used to select key informants and stratified random sampling was applied to capture diverse demographic groups. Data was collected using structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The questionnaire contained closed-ended questions, while the interviews consisted of open-ended questions. A pilot study was conducted to ensure content validity and experts reviewed the questionnaire. The Cronbach's Alpha test was used to measure internal consistency and inter-rater reliability checks were performed for the qualitative instrument.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The study employed a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques to provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of women's political representation in Oyo State. This approach allowed the researchers to combine the breadth of statistical data with the depth of individual experiences and perspectives.

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis centered on the data gathered through structured questionnaires. A total of 385 questionnaires were distributed, with 324 being successfully retrieved, resulting in a response rate of 84.2%. The report acknowledges that several factors may have influenced the non-retrieval of some questionnaires. These include logistical challenges, such as the non-availability of respondents at the time of collection and social/psychological factors, including a "lack of interest or willingness to participate" among some individuals and the "sensitive nature of political discussions" which may have made some respondents hesitant to share their views. The researchers also noted that "illiteracy and language barriers" and "logistical constraints" played a role in the incomplete retrieval of some data. Despite these challenges, the substantial response rate of 84.2% is considered representative of the study population.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents were analyzed, revealing that the majority of respondents were female (60.8%) compared to male (39.2%), indicating a strong engagement of women with the research topic. The age distribution showed that most respondents were

between 26 and 45 years old, suggesting that younger and middle-aged individuals are more involved in discussions about women's political participation.

The quantitative findings highlighted several key challenges to women's political participation in Oyo State. The study found that a significant proportion of women perceive "cultural and societal expectations" as major obstacles to their political engagement. Additionally, "financial difficulties" were identified as a primary challenge, with many respondents emphasizing the high costs associated with political campaigns. The data also revealed that women hold a disproportionately low number of leadership positions within political parties and that higher levels of education are correlated with increased political participation among women. Notably, the study found that awareness of affirmative action policies, such as Nigeria's 35% Affirmative Action for Women, remains relatively low among women in Oyo State and there is skepticism about their effectiveness. Specifically, the study reports that "55.9% of the respondents were not aware of the policies and legal frameworks that support women in politics in Oyo State."

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative portion of the study involved in-depth interviews with ten key informants, including political officeholders, representatives of civil society organizations, grassroots activists and members of political parties. These interviews provided rich, detailed narratives that helped to contextualize and explain the quantitative findings.

The qualitative analysis identified several key themes related to the barriers women face in political participation. One prominent theme was the influence of socio-cultural norms. As the report states, deeply ingrained beliefs that "politics is a 'man's world'" discourage women from participating and affect how they are received in the political space. Economic constraints were also a significant theme, with women often struggling to compete with male candidates who have access to greater financial resources. Many interviewees shared personal accounts of withdrawing from elections due to the prohibitive costs of campaigning. The structure of political parties was identified as another key barrier, with women often excluded from decision-making processes and relegated to marginalized roles within party structures. While education was generally seen as a positive factor, enhancing political awareness and confidence, the interviews revealed that some highly educated women still hesitate to enter politics due to fears of violence and intimidation. Finally, the effectiveness of affirmative action policies, such as the 35% quota, was questioned, with many interviewees suggesting that these policies "exist more in theory than in practice" and are often used as "symbolic gestures."

The qualitative data also revealed some contradictions and nuances that were not apparent in the quantitative data. For example, while the survey data indicated low levels of political participation among women, the interviews revealed that many women are, in fact, interested in politics but are discouraged by the significant external barriers they face. Similarly, while higher education is generally associated with greater political involvement, some highly educated women expressed reluctance to participate due to concerns about political violence.

Conclusion

The journey toward an inclusive political landscape in Oyo State demands unwavering commitment and collaboration. The government, political parties, civil society organizations and

media must unite to dismantle systemic barriers and champion gender equity. By implementing these recommendations financial support, legal reforms, party restructuring, grassroots education, violence prevention, improved media portrayal and robust training Oyo State can create a political environment where women's contributions are not only welcomed but celebrated. Such transformation would enrich governance, amplify diverse voices and advance a more equitable society, setting a powerful example for gender inclusion across Nigeria and beyond.

Despite incremental progress toward gender equality in governance, women in Oyo State face persistent and multifaceted barriers to political participation. Institutional biases embedded in political structures often favor male candidates, sidelining women with systemic prejudice. Financial constraints further exacerbate this exclusion, as the high costs of campaigning ranging from publicity to logistics place women, who often have less access to resources, at a stark disadvantage. Socio-cultural norms, deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions, perpetuate the perception that politics is a male domain, discouraging women from pursuing leadership roles. Additionally, a hostile political environment marked by intimidation and exclusionary practices creates a chilling effect, deterring women from engaging fully in civic life. While legislative frameworks and gender-inclusive policies, such as Nigeria's National Gender Policy, signal a commitment to equity, their impact is severely undermined by inconsistent implementation, weak enforcement and a lack of accountability.

Recommendations

Overcoming these entrenched obstacles requires a comprehensive and coordinated strategy that integrates robust policy enforcement, economic empowerment, political education and cultural transformation to foster an environment where women can thrive politically. To address these challenges and create a more inclusive political landscape, the following targeted recommendations provide a roadmap for change, each addressing a critical dimension of the problem.

- **Financial Support:** Establishing dedicated funding mechanisms, such as grants or subsidies specifically for female candidates, would alleviate the financial burdens of campaigning. These funds could cover essentials like campaign materials, travel and media outreach, enabling women to compete on equal footing with their male counterparts. Additionally, fostering public-private partnerships could amplify these efforts, with businesses and NGOs contributing resources to support women's campaigns. By reducing economic disparities, these initiatives would empower more women to enter and sustain their political journeys, leveling the playing field in Oyo State's competitive electoral landscape.
- **Legal Enforcement:** Strengthening the enforcement of existing gender-inclusive policies is paramount to achieving equitable representation. Legislative reforms should mandate quotas for female candidates within political parties, ensuring a minimum level of representation in candidate lists and leadership roles. These quotas, backed by clear penalties for non-compliance, would compel parties to prioritize gender equity. Furthermore, state institutions must enhance monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure policies like the National Gender Policy are not merely symbolic but actively implemented. Such measures would institutionalize gender equity, creating systemic change that dismantles barriers to women's political participation.

- **Political Party Reforms:** The internal dynamics of political parties often perpetuate gender disparities. To counter this, parties must undertake deliberate reforms to foster inclusivity. Reserving leadership positions such as party executives or committee chairs for women would elevate their influence and visibility. Additionally, implementing mentorship programs tailored for female members would provide guidance, networking opportunities and skill-building, nurturing a new generation of women leaders. By dismantling discriminatory practices and prioritizing gender equity, parties can transform into incubators of female talent, fostering an environment where women's contributions are valued and amplified.
- **Grassroots Awareness Campaigns:** Cultural transformation begins at the community level. Grassroots sensitization programs are essential to educate women about their political rights and encourage their active participation. These campaigns should engage local leaders, religious institutions and community groups to challenge patriarchal norms and promote gender-inclusive political discourse. Workshops, town halls and media campaigns can empower women with knowledge of their civic roles while reshaping societal attitudes that view politics as a male preserve.
- **Combating Violence and Intimidation:** Physical, psychological and verbal harassment create a hostile environment that silences women and discourages their involvement. Strengthening law enforcement measures to prevent and penalize such acts is critical. This includes training police to recognize and address political violence against women, as well as establishing dedicated reporting mechanisms. Legal support for victims, including access to pro bono services and counseling, would further ensure their safety and resilience.
- **Improved Media Representation:** Media shapes public perceptions and can either reinforce stereotypes or challenge them. Promoting positive portrayals of female politicians highlighting their achievements and leadership would counter narratives that undermine women's credibility. Media outlets must commit to equitable coverage, ensuring women's political activities receive the same attention as those of their male counterparts. Collaborative efforts with media houses to develop gender-sensitive reporting guidelines could drive this change. A balanced media narrative would not only elevate women's visibility but also inspire public support for their leadership, fostering a more inclusive political culture.
- **Expanding Mentorship and Training Programs:** Equipping women with the skills and confidence to navigate politics is essential for long-term change. Expanding accessible leadership training programs would provide aspiring female politicians with expertise in campaign strategies, public speaking and policy development. Mentorship initiatives, connecting experienced women leaders with newcomers, would offer guidance and build networks of support. These programs should be inclusive, reaching women in rural and urban areas alike and tailored to address the unique challenges they face. By fostering a pipeline of capable women leaders, these initiatives would ensure sustained progress in women's political representation.

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