



Gender Representation and Equality in Leadership positions in Nigeria

Abstract

In Nigeria, gender representation in governance and decision-making is significantly low, with women accounting for just about 7 per cent of elective and appointive positions. Studies have shown this is far below the African average of 23.4 percent and the 35 per cent affirmative action, a national policy designed to enhance women's participation in governance. Despite women making up roughly 49 per cent of the population of the country, they still face major barriers ranging from limited financial resources to other structural and cultural norms that hinder their progress. This underrepresentation limits the development of gender-sensitive policies, perpetuates systemic gender inequalities and hampers democratic consolidation. It is against this backdrop that this paper explored the gender gap in leadership positions in Nigeria and examined particularly how leadership development programmes have impacted on women representation. The paper discovered that while progress has been made in specific sectors such as the banking sector, much remains to be done in other areas such as politics. It therefore, recommended that both the government and the private sector should commit to the 35% affirmative action such as reserving at least 35% of the cabinet seats at both the federal and state levels for women, support economically and educationally disadvantaged women with scholarships, fellowship and access to financial networks.

Keywords: Gender representation, Gender equality, leadership development, 35% affirmative action, gender policies.

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Introduction

The history of Nigeria has been shaped by numerous women who have contributed immensely in various fields. These women have overcome many challenges and barriers to emerge as leaders, pioneers and trailblazers in many fields, they have broken stereotypes glass ceilings and paved

ways for future generations of women in Nigeria. Women such as Queen Amina of Zazzau, the first woman to become a Queen in a male dominated society, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, prominent Nigerian feminist, activist and politician who through the Abeokuta Women's Union contributed to the fight for Nigeria's independence,

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Hajia Gambo Sawaba, women's rights activist, politician and philanthropist who served as deputy chairman of the Great Nigeria People's Party (GNPP), Margaret Ekpo another women's rights activist and social mobilizer, a politician of no mean repute of the First Republic and a leading member of a class of traditional Nigerian women activists, many of whom rallied women beyond notions of ethnic solidarity, Nwanyeruwa who alongside Ikonna, Nwunedia and Nwugo (the Oloko trio) famously led the Aba women riots of 1929 to protest against a census they feared would lead to taxation on women and so on played major roles in the development of pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria.

In the modern time, women such as Prof Grace Alele Williams the first female Vice Chancellor of a Nigerian university, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the first African Director General of the World Trade Organization, former Managing Director of the World Bank and Minister of Finance in Nigeria, Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations, Patricia Ette, former Speaker of Nigeria's House of Representatives, Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, a former Vice President of World Bank's Africa region, Arunma Oteh, a former Treasurer and Vice President of the World Bank and former Director General of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), Adaora Umeoji, Miriam Olusanya, Nneka Onyeali-Ikpe, Yemisi Edun, Bolaji Agbede, Tomi Somefun, Yetunde Oni managing directors of Zenith Bank, Guarantee Trust Bank (GTB), Fidelity Bank, FCMB, Access Holdings, Unity Bank and Union Bank respectively and a

host of other women have risen to prominent decision-making and leadership positions in Nigeria and internationally.

Despite accounting for almost half the population of Nigeria in 2024, 49.4 percent according to World Bank (2014) and having demonstrated capabilities and competence in the various leadership roles they have taken, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles across various sectors including the academia, politics, military, business and civil society.

Nigeria has traditionally faced the problem of gender inequality where deep rooted cultural and religious norms and systemic discrimination have limited the opportunities of women to participate in governance. Traditional gender roles, expectations and stereotypes have perpetuated the subordination of women in various spheres of life. The legacy of colonization and modernization has also influenced gender dynamics in Nigeria, further exacerbating existing inequalities and disparities.

While Nigeria has formulated gender policies designed to promote gender equality and social inclusion by addressing gender gaps and empowering women and other marginalized groups, and integrating gender considerations into all aspects of development, including social protection particularly in the workplace, humanitarian actions and legislations and enhancing women's participation in leadership and governance, the percentage of women in leadership positions in the country is still very low compared with the menfolk.

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For instance, since independence in 1960, no woman has ever elected to the office of President, Head of State, Prime Minister or even Vice President. There are only 20 women in the national assembly, representing a very insignificant 4.3 percent of the 469 member strong national assembly while there are only 13 female ministers in a 48 member strong cabinet of President Bola Tinubu. Across the states, there is no single female governor, while out of the 991 seats at the states' houses of assemblies, women occupy only 45 seats representing a paltry 4.5 percent. In the academia, there are currently only 12 female vice chancellors in Nigeria, out of approximately 270 universities representing only 4.7 percent of the population of vice chancellors. Since independence in 1960, only 38 women have served as vice chancellors of universities in the country.

In the military, no woman has ever served as Service Chief or General Officer Commanding (GOC) despite several women like Major General Aderonke Kale breaking the ranks to reach high ranks. The situation of women in the military has even got worse with a 2017 policy revision which reportedly ended the admission of female cadets into the regular combatant course at the Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA) which is a factor that may prevent them from reaching the Service Chiefs positions in the future. Even the Nigerian Police has never had a female Inspector General (IG) since the establishment of the force in 1930.

Evidence suggest that the exclusion or underrepresentation of women across the various sectors has caused negative

consequences such as perpetuation and widening of the income gap or inequality between men and women, leading to limited access to social protection and hindering economic empowerment (Abubakar, 2025), undermining democratic values including violation of women's fundamental rights as citizens of their various countries, exacerbating workplace challenges including harassment, unequal workloads and limited opportunities for advancement in fields dominated by men and promotion of social injustice which cause women to lose their voices in decision-making enterprises.

This research is designed, therefore, to explore how diversity and gender policies by organizations and the Nigerian government have impacted on gender representation in leadership positions in Nigeria; study the factors that have militated against women's effective participation in leadership and decision-making in Nigeria as well as the impact of leadership development in promoting gender inclusivity in Nigeria.

Gender Representation

Gender issues in Nigeria and elsewhere reflect the complexities relating to the roles, rights and obligations of men and women. Gender representation refers to the ways in which different genders are depicted, included and recognized in various social, political and cultural contexts. It involves both the presence of the two genders (like in a workforce or a political party) and the quality of those portrayals which can either reinforce or challenge stereotypes and social norms. It can be measured in terms of numbers (to ascertain how both genders are

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represented in the workplace) or analyzed qualitatively for the depth and accuracy of the roles shown.

To be able to have a better understanding of gender representation, it is important to clarify the concept gender and understand the distinction between it and sex – another concept with which it is often confused. This distinction between gender and sex will enable us to understand the complexities of human identity and social roles.

Sex refers to the biological differences between males and females, such as reproductive organs, chromosomes and hormonal profiles. The classification is typically binary, with individuals categorized as male and female based on these biological factors, although some biologists these days tend to think there is a wider spectrum than just the binary male and female.

In contrast, gender is not biological but a social construct which encompasses the roles, behaviours, activities, expectations and societal norms that cultures associate with being male or female, it varies across different cultures and historical periods. For instance, what one society/culture considers 'masculine' or 'feminine' may differ from the perceptions of other cultures and the traits can evolve. Coates (2013) emphasized the dynamism of gender. Her perspective aligns with the concept of performative gender which argues that gender identity is expressed through repeated behaviours and social interactions. It challenges the traditional binary understanding of gender, highlighting that individuals may embody a range of traits and identities

that do not conform strictly to societal expectations of masculinity and femininity. Coates advocates for recognizing plural masculinities and femininities for she believed that there is no single way to be a man or a woman due to prevailing factors such as race, class, sexuality and culture.

National Gender Policy and Women Participation in Governance

Nigeria's diversity and gender policies are centered on the National Gender Policy (2021-2026). The Policy formulated in 2006 is designed to promote gender equality, women's representation and social inclusion across all segments of national life. It seeks to mainstream gender into development by addressing inequalities in governance, health, education and economic participation. It makes provisions for the support of vulnerable groups like persons living with disabilities thereby creating a just society free from discrimination.

Ayamba *et. al.* (nd) averred that the revised policy of 2021-2026 places practical and strategic gender needs at the heart of both the policy and Nigeria's common objective of achieving social inclusion and promoting shared values irrespective of ethnicity, sex or other differences unlike the 2006 document conceptualized on institutional engagement.

The National Gender Policy is aimed at complementing regional and international efforts and initiatives on gender equality, as well as inspiring other national and subnational efforts to ensure equality in democratic governance and inclusive representation of women in all strata of leadership.

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Among the initiatives include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted in 1948 and which established that all humans are born free and equal in right; 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN-CEDAW) which obligates states to eliminate discrimination in public and private life, covering legal, social and cultural aspects; 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (PFA) which sets strategic objectives and actions across 12 critical areas (such as poverty, health, power, education) for women empowerment; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) specifically SDG 5 which targets gender equality while other goals integrate gender perspectives, supported by monitoring frameworks; Equal Remuneration Convention (No 100) and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No 111) of the International Labour Organizations; African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the rights of women in Africa which requires state parties to combat all forms of discrimination against women through appropriate legislative measures; the African Development Bank (AfDB) Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Index; ECOWAS Gender and Election Strategic Framework among other relevant documents, treatises and domestic initiatives designed to promote gender balanced representation in politics, policy and decision-making in Nigeria.

While the Nigerian government has ratified the UN-CEDAW and the African Union protocol on the rights of women in Africa otherwise known as the Maputo Protocol, these initiatives

have produced marginal results in Nigeria considering the low statistics of women political participation in the country (Ogu, *et. al.* 2016)

Specific Sectors Examples Gender Policies

Various institutions in Nigeria have formulated and are implementing gender policies designed to address gender inequality and increase the representation of women in decision-making and leadership. Here we shall examine specific sectors to understand what have been done.

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)

INEC Gender Policy (IGP) was adopted in 2014 and reviewed in 2021 and is anchored on the 1999 Constitution of the FRN and other international and regional documents on human rights such as International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR1325) (INEC, 2021) and so on. The policy is a strategic commitment to gender equality in Nigeria's electoral process aimed at ensuring women's full participation as voters, candidates and staff.

The policy hopes to increase women's participation in politics and decision-making, achieve gender balance in recruitment, promotion and appointments within the commission and integrate gender perspectives in all electoral processes and activities, It uses a Gender and Development (GAD) framework for mainstreaming, involves

internal, policy reviews, stakeholders engagement and practical actions like voters education for women and creates platforms for women's voices and experiences to shape governance.

Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN)

Nigeria's apex bank Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) promotes gender equality through mandatory regulatory measures such as the mandate requiring banks to aim for at least 30-40% female representation on boards and in senior management, internal initiatives such as that created the CBN Women's Network that addresses women's economic empowerment and financial inclusion through dedicated tasks.

The policy aims to increase women's presence in decision-making roles which it recognizes as an economic necessity and not just an ethical one. It supports female talent pipelines, mentorship, flexible work arrangements and leadership development programmes. The bank supports the National Financial Inclusion Strategy (NFIS) which increases female agents in financial networks. The bank has formulated the Corporate Governance Guidelines of 2023 which requires that no bank board should be composed of only one gender.

It is noteworthy to point out that under the current leadership of the bank, there has been remarkable improvement in women's participation in decision-making. As at the 4th quarter of 2025, there are 11 females leading some of Nigeria's most prominent banks as managing directors making a 50% female representation and a 35% women representation in banks' board of

directors according to the CBN Governor (Abimbola, 2025).

University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN)

Nigeria's premier university, University of Nigeria Nsukka addresses gender equality through its Gender and Development Centre (Gen-Cent) focusing on promoting gender equality, women leadership and strictly enforcing a sexual misconduct policy. The University's gender policy aligns with the broader national gender policy seeking to empower women and ensure equal opportunities, particularly in education with Gen-Cent advocating for greater female participation in governance in leadership positions such as principal officers (VC, DVCs, Registrar, Librarian, Bursar etc), deans and Heads of Departments.

While Gen-Cent strives to ensure gender equality, challenges remain. Notable is the fact that since establishment in 1960, no woman has ever served as vice chancellor and only 2 out of the 17 current deans of faculties are women making a paltry 12% representation. This shows a historically male dominated leadership.

Impact of the National Gender Policy of Women Representation in Leadership

In the past two decades, there has been an impressive rise in women's political representation across the world with the global average in the share of women in national parliaments particularly doubling during that time, and all regions making substantial progress towards the goal of 30 percent women's representation in decision-making.

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It is important to note that while the rate of increase in the political representation of women has been fast in Africa with four of the world's top 10 countries, in terms of women share of single or lower house of parliament, being Sub-Saharan African countries (Rwanda, Seychelles, Senegal and South Africa), Nigeria has achieved little in this regard. Nigeria has a policy environment that seems to support gender equity. Firstly, the country is a signatory to most of the international conventions on gender equality and women empowerment. Secondly, successive national governments have established a vibrant institutional structure for the development and implementation of gender policies. There is also a widespread appreciation of gender issues as both government and non-governmental organizations emphasize gender mainstreaming in their activities but in reality so little progress is being made.

Nigeria since return to democratic rule in 1999 has organized seven general elections (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023) of which the record of women's participation has been abysmal. Available records show that women's representation especially at the National Assembly has never crossed the 10 percent threshold. In 1999 and 2003, it was 3.4 and 4.9 percent respectively. It slightly improved to 7.0 percent in 2007 but declined to 6.8 and 5.6 percent in 2011 and 2015 respectively. In 2019, women representation was 4.4 percent (6.4 in the Senate and 3.6 in the House of Representatives) and 3.8 percent in 2023 (4.2 in the Senate and 3.7 in the House of Representatives). At the state houses of assemblies, the figure is

even more abject with only 45 seats out of 991 seats occupied by women giving a 4.5 percent representation (Opara, 2025). It is equally important to note that of the 18 former senate presidents and House of Representatives speakers, only one (Patricia Ette) is a woman giving a 5.5 percent representation.

Table 1: Women Representation in Federal Cabinets (1999-2023)

President	Period	No of female ministers/no of ministers	Percent
Olusegun Obasanjo	1999-2003	7/47	14.9
	2003-2007	6/49	12.2
Umaru Yar Adua	2007-2010	7/36	19.4
Goodluck Jonathan	2010/2011-2015	13/41	31.7
Muhammad Buhari	2015-2019	7/36	19.4
	2019-2023	7/43	16.2
Bola Ahmed Tinubu	2023 to date	8/48	18.6

What the table above shows is that no president other than Goodluck Jonathan has come close to meeting or exceeding the 35 percent affirmative action. Similarly, in the judiciary, only two women (Miriam Aloma Mukthar and Kudirat Kekere-Ekun) out of eighteen have served as Chief Justices of Nigeria since 1999 which gives a percent of 11.1. At the Court of Appeal, only two women (Zainab Bulkachawa and Monica Dongban-Memsem) have served as presidents out of seven since 1976.

It is perhaps in the banking sector that tremendous progress seems to have been made with woman occupying almost half of the position of managing directors and other top management positions. The biggest challenge,

however, is with the Central Bank where no woman since 2006 has served as governor out of four appointed within the period.

Factors Militating against Women's Effective Participation in Leadership and Decision-Making

Without the full participation of both men and women in the development process, it is impossible to have sustainable and all round development of a society. According to Hora (2024), such a balanced development requires that all forms of discrimination against women are removed and they be protected from all forms of violence. It is important therefore to examine the factors that militate against women's participation in leadership and decision-making.

Despite the benefits of women participation in leadership and decision-making, women have not fully participated in leadership and decision-making as a result of the following factors.

- i. Deep seated socio-cultural norms, stereotypes and traditional gender roles: Nigeria being a highly patriarchic society, many cultures believe women's role is basically domestic - cooking, washing, caregiving and submission while restriction their education, participation in leadership and decision-making in the society and economic power. These abuses are reinforced by practices like bride price (Ogu and Areji, 2023), limited inheritance rights, harmful widowhood rituals (Ifemeje and Umejiaku, 2024)

- and gendered violence disguised as cultural correction.
- ii. Lack of education: Ogu and Areji (2023) have argued that lack of education especially at the grass root level and most importantly in the rural areas is the single most potent factor causing discrimination and marginalization of women. When a woman is educated, she becomes empowered and enlightened, the knowledge that comes with that dispels ignorance and empowers her to compete favourably with the mensfolk but when a woman lacks education as many women in Nigeria do, she finds herself at the mercy of those who.
- iii. Limited Financial resources: this constitutes a major barrier to women's participation in leadership and spans across all spheres of life including political, corporate and entrepreneurial. These entrenched economic disparities mean that women often have less access to capital, fewer professional networks. This means that they have to greatly rely on family a resource which directly restricts their ability to launch campaigns, secure senior positions in government and businesses. Financial independence often serves as a catalyst for leadership, while a lack of resources restricts women from entering, competing, and succeeding in leadership positions (WEF, 2023). Because political campaigns are expensive in Nigeria and with women

- having limited resources, they are prevented from entering races.
- iv. Lack of role models: the lack of female role models in top-level positions in leadership significantly hinders women's participation. It perpetuates stereotypes, reduces confidence and limits mentorship opportunities and Dagneu *et. al.* (2020) said, in the absence of visible examples, women often struggle to navigate male-dominated "sticky floor" environments, reinforcing the perception that high-level leadership is strictly a male affair. A 2022 study from the UK found that 43% of women believe that they would be more successful if they had a role model in the workplace. The research also revealed that whilst 67% of women do have someone they look up to in life, more than half (55%) agree that there is a lack of relatable role models in the workplace. Gladstone *et. al.* (2024) showed that exposing girls to role models in STEM careers led to greater motivation in those fields of study among girls of colour.

Has Leadership Development been Impactful in Promoting Gender Inclusivity?

The importance of leadership development in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. It promotes gender inclusivity by dismantling patriarchal barriers, fostering diverse decision-making and equipping women with skills needed to overcome systemic

discrimination. Training targeted at women empowerment, mentorship and gender-responsive policies improve organizational culture, enhance productivity and increase female representation in leadership roles.

Leadership development programmes such as the Nigerian Women Trust Fund (NWTF) which runs the "empowering Young Women for Political Leadership Hub" to boost women's presence in governance and address the low representation of women in the National Assembly since 1999; the Evolve mentoring program (SEGEI) of LEAP Africa which connects strong enough girls between the ages of 18-35 to outstanding female professionals for real-world leadership and career inspiration and guidance and support on their life journey; NITDA IgniteHer Bootcamp which accelerates gender inclusion and economic empowerment of women through digital literacy skills to boost their economic participation; IFES Young Women's Leadership Training Programme (YWLTP) which targets women aged 18-30 including those with disabilities, to build the needed confidence for political and civic engagement; Renewed Women's Voice and Leadership (RWVL) supported by ActionAid Nigeria to strengthen women's leadership at all levels, particularly for marginalized women and many others have been initiated and implemented though with varying degrees of success.

Leadership development is critical for achieving gender equity, fostering innovation and driving inclusive decision-making processes. It empowers women to overcome systemic barriers

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and ensures diverse perspectives in leadership, which are essential for addressing complex global challenges. In addition, developing women leaders enhances performance, as diversity in leadership is linked to improved financial outcomes, employees satisfaction and social impact.

Nigeria has made progress in improving gender diversity and bringing an increasing number of women particularly in the corporate world into leadership roles. Global consulting firm, McKinsey and Company in its latest report revealed that women hold about 29 per cent of managerial and C-suite roles (Ekugo, 2025). The report is supported by the United Nations report that 22 per cent of decision-making positions are held by women in Nigeria's private sector (Clement, 2024).

While appreciable progress has made in the corporate world, many of the structural and cultural barriers that hinder women's progress remain stubbornly intact particularly in politics where women occupy only about 6.7 per cent elective and appointive positions, far below the African regional average of 23.4 per cent.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigeria faces a gender disparity problem particularly against women who have demonstrated enough competence even in those fields traditionally reserved for men. While successive governments through well-articulated policies have attempted to bridge the gap in gender representation, many structural and cultural barriers that hinder women's progress remain intact. Challenges such as traditional gender roles that typically see women as

only fit for domestic duties, lack of financial resources and access to networks, lack of role models and education have created a disproportionate representation of women at the top level of decision-making in Nigeria. It is important, however, to note that a new wave of leadership, institutional reforms and shifting social norms offers reasons for optimism. It is to that effect, that the following recommendations are made:

- i. To ensure that leadership development contributes to fairer women representation in leadership and decision-making, leadership development should be culturally responsive. Programs should integrate modules that explore the impact of culture on women empowerment; leaders particularly in politics should reflect on their cultural biases and assumptions so as to develop inclusive mindsets; cross cultural mentorship should be broadened and leadership training should be tailored to local contents to align with regional cultural norms which have improved women participation elsewhere in Africa.
- ii. Supporting economically and educationally disadvantaged women in leadership roles: this can be done through award of scholarships and fellowships. This financial aid will aid their education and leadership training; providing them access to networks that enable them participate in leadership workshops and conferences that connect them with mentors and

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sponsors; reforms like paid internships, equitable wages and inclusive hiring practices and promoting community-based leadership trainings to empower women locally and help them rise to broader leadership roles.

- iii. Commitment to the 35 per cent affirmative action which requires 35 per cent representation of women in all governance, appointive and elective positions aimed at gender inclusion. In addition, diversity quotas could be promoted through the setting of measurable targets for hiring and promoting women from diverse backgrounds; promoting transparency in hiring by creating clear pathways for advancement with objective criteria to reduce bias and offering childcare, transportation subsidies and mental health resources to women to enhance their participation.

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