



Gender, Power, and Political Representation: Women and the Dynamics of Governance in the Nigerian Fourth Republic (1999-2023)

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Abstract

This paper explores gender, power, and political representation in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria (1999-2023), particularly the underrepresentation of women in politics. The study is based on Feminist Institutionalism and political representation theory and has a mixed-method (hybrid) design, comprising a quantitative longitudinal analysis of electoral data and qualitative information from existing literature and policy reports based on interviews. The results indicate that being underrepresented in Nigeria is not just a matter of low participation of women but the structural nature of political institutions. There is quantitative evidence of a variable, but overall low female representation in the National Assembly, and a significant decrease in the 2023 elections. The qualitative analysis also proves that the exclusion is practised by means of party gatekeeping, financial scarcity, and established patriarchal standards that tend to restrict women's access to the space of candidacy and decision-making. It is also determined that the substantive representation is limited by low descriptive representation, which undermines the democratic inclusiveness and responsiveness of policies. The research concludes that the democratic process in Nigeria is a paradox: elections continue without gender-equal governance. It suggests reforms in institutions, such as gender quotas, party restructuring, and socio-cultural change, as ways to achieve political representation.

Keywords: Nigerian Fourth Republic, Gender, women, Nigerian women, Power

Introduction

The issues of gender, power, and political representation are key in current political discussions, especially in emerging democracies where the process of institutional development is intertwined with the privilege of long-standing socio-cultural hierarchies. In the Fourth Republic in Nigeria, since 1999, when democracy was re-established after a long military rule, there have been expectations of inclusive participation and equitable representation across gender lines during the 1960s and 1970s. However, over two decades into democratic consolidation, the political landscape continues to mirror enduring asymmetries in power relations, with women occupying a marginal position within formal structures of governance (Adesote and Olalere, 2025). Globally, women's participation in governance is widely recognised as an important indicator of the quality of democratic governance, social justice, and sustainable development. International frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular, Goal 5, highlight the importance of gender parity



in political decision-making. Despite these normative commitments, the Nigerian experience shows a significant gap between what is expected in policy and what is experienced in empirical reality. Women make up close to half of the country's population and electorate, yet their representation in elective and appointive offices is disproportionately low (Adewumi & Ipele, 2024).

The Fourth Republic provides an interesting context for an analysis of the intersection between gender and power. While it has enabled periodic elections, the enlargement of civil liberties, and institutional reforms, it has also revealed the strength of patriarchal political structures that limit women's access to power. Political parties, which are the main vehicles of political participation, are still dominated by men in most cases and characterised by sidelining women through discriminatory nomination processes and informal exclusionary practices (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023). Scholarly literature, including Ette & Akpan-Obong (2023); Adesote and Olalere (2025), and Adewumi & Ipele (2024), points to a paradox in the Nigerian democratic experience: the growth of democratic governance has not translated into proportional gender inclusion. Instead, political participation is still mediated by informal networks, patronage systems and socio-economic barriers that unduly disadvantage women (Omoregie, 2025). This implies that democratisation is not enough to deconstruct ingrained gender hierarchies embedded in political institutions.

Empirical data highlights the severity of gender disparity in Nigeria political system. Since 1999, women have been underrepresented at all levels of governance, with no female elected president, vice president, or state governor during this period. Representation in the National Assembly has consistently been low, with women holding a small proportion of legislative seats (Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD], 2022). This steady underrepresentation is a cause for fundamental concern about the inclusiveness and legitimacy of Nigeria's democratic institutions. According to Ette & Akpan-Obong (2023), beyond numerical representation, the disadvantages of gender inequalities can also be seen in the distribution of power in political institutions. Women entering political office often encounter structural limitations, including marginalisation within party hierarchies and at key decision-making processes. As a result, descriptive representation does not necessarily imply substantive representation, as women's capacity to shape policy outcomes remains limited.

The implications of gender inequality in governance go beyond representation in terms of quality of democratic outcomes. Research has shown that the greater women's participation in the political process, the greater the improvement in policy responsiveness, social equity, and democratic accountability (Omoregie, 2025). However, the continued exclusion of women from leadership roles compromises these possible benefits and results in governance systems that do not adequately reflect the diversity of societal interests. Moreover, Nigeria has always performed below international benchmarks when it comes to gender representation. The Beijing Platform for Action has recommended the minimum threshold of 30-35% representation of women in political decision-making, but this has not been achieved in Nigeria since the beginning of the Fourth Republic. This disparity between international commitments and local realities is a reflection of the limitations of existing institutional frameworks and policy interventions (Omoregie, 2025).

The persistence of this problem is grounded in a complex web of structural, institutional and socio-cultural factors. Patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes still influence societal views of leadership, often discouraging women from pursuing a political career and limiting their acceptance within the political sphere (Aina, 2019). These cultural restrictions are also enforced through institutional barriers, such as discriminatory practices within political parties and marginalisation of women in party hierarchies (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023). Against this background, the study of the role of gender, power and political representation in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria is both timely and imperative. By examining the dynamics of women's participation in governance between 1999 and 2023, this research aims to offer critical insights into the structural barriers that impede women's inclusion and the broader implications of these inequalities for democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Literature Review

The literature on women's political representation has been influenced by the distinction between descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. Descriptive representation refers to the numerical presence of women in political institutions; substantive representation concerns whether women's interests and gender equality agendas are actually advanced; symbolic representation concerns the



meanings attached to women's presence and how women's presence reconfigures ideas of who belongs in politics. This conceptual distinction is particularly important in the case of Nigeria, where the central problem is not merely low numbers. Even where women do gain access to institutions, the question remains of whether they can influence agenda-setting, coalition-building, oversight and policy outcomes in ways that result in shifted governance.

African politics scholarship has sharpened this debate by emphasising sustainability, coalition-building, and institutional design. Edgell (2018) argues that the political gains of women are not secure because they depend on quotas or short-term increases in their presence, rather than on the measures taken (or not) or their viability and substantiality over time. Kang and Tripp (2018) respectively demonstrate the importance of domestic women's coalitions in the adoption of quotas in African countries and find that the mobilisation of women is most effective when broad-based and politically strategic rather than narrowly elite. These studies are relevant for Nigeria because they consider underrepresentation not as an institutional residue of culture but as an institutional outcome of a dynamic interaction between parties, coalitions, and formal reform.

Feminist institutionalism provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding why constitutional equality does not translate into political equality. Mackay et al. (2010) contend that a feminist institutionalist perspective genders institutional analysis by asking questions about how political institutions are formed through relations of power that often appear neutral but act in gendered ways. Kenny (2014) goes further to say that a feminist institutionalist approach draws attention to the gendered basis of political institutions, the importance of informal rules and the processes of continuity and change. This perspective is particularly relevant for Nigeria because many of the barriers faced by women are not written directly into the Constitution; instead, they are reproduced through informal practices such as elite brokerage, party patronage, sponsorship expectations, candidate monetisation, and norms about who looks electable or leader-like.

Feminist institutionalism is especially valuable in cases where formal democratic political institutions coexist with strong informal politics. Nigeria's electoral system, party structures and federal arrangements are formally bound by the rules. Still, access to candidacy and political advancement is highly mediated by personal networks, incumbency advantages, informal financing and the discretion of party elites. A feminist institutionalist lens helps realise that these informal institutions are not incidental but central to how governance works. They define the thresholds of entry, the norms of loyalty, and the expectations of behaviour that are associated with political office. Underrepresentation of women thus reflects not simply a lack of inclusion but the operation of an institutional order in which masculine authority has been historically codified as political common sense.

A growing body of research on African politics makes it clear that parties are not gender-neutral channels of representation. Clayton and Zetterberg (2021), based on survey data from African legislatures, conclude that women are far more likely than men to report high levels of party discipline, and that parties often recruit women on the basis of gendered criteria, such as rewarding conformity and loyalty. Their findings are especially relevant in Nigeria, where party sponsorship is the primary path to office and where the internal life of parties is often hierarchical, transactional and male-dominated. Even when women gain entry to political institutions, this may occur under conditions that limit women's autonomy and undermine their ability to pursue transformative political agendas. Related work on violence and harassment against female politicians brings this perspective even sharper. Krook and Restrepo Sanin (2019) conceptualise violence against women in politics as a major obstacle to women's participation, which is shaped and informed by structural, cultural and symbolic forms of gender bias. Their argument is important for Nigeria because it expands the concept of exclusion beyond formal denial of rights. Women, through intimidation, insult, smear campaigns, economic pressure and open or concealed, but real determinants of political viability, can be discouraged, silenced or driven out of politics.

Nigeria-focused scholarship generally agrees with the argument that the exclusion of women is historically entrenched and institutionally reproduced. Ugodunwa (2020) attributes the underrepresentation of women to broader deficits in national development and democratic consolidation, thereby highlighting the power implications of gendered exclusion. Other studies centered on Nigeria also replicate the idea of patriarchal party structures, lack of financial resources,



intimidation, gender stereotypes, and social disrespect for women in politics as recurring constrictions. What is remarkable throughout this literature is that women are almost never described as being politically passive. Rather, the focus is on the ways in which political institutions denigrate or obstruct women's participation at the level where candidacy, authority, and decision-making are distributed.

Nigeria's policy architecture for gender equality has become more elaborate over the years. The National Gender Policy, approved in the mid-2000s, called for affirmative action, enhanced gender mainstreaming, and greater women's representation in governance (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development [FMWASD], 2008), as did its implementation framework. The revised 2021 National Gender Policy continued this logic and declared gender equality and social inclusion to be fundamental to good governance and national development (FMWA, 2021). The INEC Gender Policy also recognised the gatekeeping role of political parties, the need to improve women's participation in politics, and the importance of gender-sensitive electoral governance (INEC, 2021). Yet the literature and policy record demonstrate that the existence of such commitments has not translated into strong legal enforcement.

Taken together, the literature appears to support four propositions that serve as a guide for this article. First, that women's under-representation in Nigeria is not an accidental event but is historically patterned. Second, political parties and informal institutions are key processes of exclusion. Third, descriptive representation cannot be measured in any meaningful way without some consideration of power, autonomy, and the sustainability of gains. Fourth, policy commitments without binding institutional reform are unlikely to generate a lasting transformation.

Methodology

The research design of his study is a hybrid (mixed-methods) explanatory sequential design to examine gender, power, and political representation in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria between 1999 and 2023. The design is suitable, as the issue being studied is both empirical and interpretive: women should be measured in terms of their representation across electoral cycles and the underlying institutional, cultural, and political processes that lead to such outcomes. Explanatory sequential designs are also applied specifically to mixed-methods studies in which quantitative trends are to be explained by qualitative evidence, and integration enhances the overall explanatory value of the study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013).

The research is grounded in a practical research paradigm that allows integrating quantitative and qualitative methods based on the requirements of the research issue rather than the inflexibility of a single methodological tradition (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative strand studies the longitudinal patterns in the political representation of women since the 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections. The official and reputable sources of data will include the election outcomes and result-analysis archives of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), as well as the Inter-Parliamentary Union's database on women in parliament.

The qualitative strand aims to explain the trends observed during the quantitative phase. It will be based on semi-structured key informant interviews and analysis of documents. The participants in the interview will be selected purposively based on their relevance and expertise and will include female politicians, party officials, gender advocates, election observers, civil society leaders, and Nigerian political science scholars. A sample of 25 respondents was adopted to achieve depth, diversity, and saturation in elite political studies. The sources of documentary materials will include party constitutions, party nomination rules, legislative debates, policy documents, and gender-related advocacy reports. The interview guide was structured around the study's key explanatory areas: party gatekeeping, campaign financing, political violence, patriarchal norms, and the substantive role of women in governance. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data using a hybrid deductive-inductive coding approach involved transcribing the data and subsequently coding them into initial categories based on feminist institutionalism and representation theory, with additional themes emerging as the analysis progressed.

There were also three levels of integration: design, analysis, and interpretation. To begin with, the qualitative stage was directly related to the quantitative outcomes, as the interview themes were chosen to explain statistical trends. Second, joint displays were used to combine findings and compare them visually and analytically, i.e., numerical trends and qualitative themes. Third, meta-inferences were



created based on converging, complementary, or divergent points between them (Fetters et al., 2013; Guetterman et al., 2015).

Findings and Analysis

Women and Longitudinal Representation

The results indicate that the exclusion of women from the governance of the fourth republic of Nigeria is not an isolated phenomenon but rather systemic, cumulative, and an institution-reproducing phenomenon. The trend is clear throughout the years in question, with women being grossly underrepresented in the areas of political authority that have the most significant impact, namely the Senate, the House of Representatives, as well as Executive offices. The best gains were registered in the mid-2000s, yet they were not consolidated. Rather, the post-2007 era can be described as the era of stagnation and then regression, and the particularly dismal results of the 2023 elections. This evidence supports the main idea of feminist institutionalism: formal democratisation did not disrupt the informal patriarchal policies governing access to political power in Nigeria (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023; Iruke, 2024).

On the national scale, there is no elected woman president, vice president, or Governor in the Fourth Republic. The 2024 report issued by the CDD also states that the Senate has never had more than 9 women, and that women's representation in the House has always been low, given its 360 seats. It implies that the crisis does not lie in the appearance of candidates, but in the long-term exclusion of candidates from the most valuable political posts, where the power to set agendas is concentrated (Iruke, 2024). It is evident that the issue can be perceived through analysing how women have been represented in the National Assembly throughout the years. The following years' benchmarks indicate a small increment in 2007 and the subsequent degradation of the gains.

Table 1: Women's representation in the National Assembly in the Nigerian Fourth Republic

Election cycle	Women in the Senate	Women in the House of Representatives	Total women in National Assembly	Approx. share of 469 seats
1999	3	12	15	3.2%
2003	3	22	25	5.3%
2007	9	25	34	7.2%
2015	7	20	27	5.8%
2019*	7	13	20	4.3%
2023**	3	14	17	3.6%

Authors' Compilation (2026)

* 2019 House figure reflects the post-rerun composition noted by IPU.

** 2023 figure reflects the composition at the start of the 10th National Assembly.

The table 1 shows three key findings. First, the number of women in parliament improved between 1999 and 2007, although even at its peak, it remained far below the 30-35 per cent parity level projected in Nigeria's National Gender Policy and international gender-equality commitments. Second, the trend after 2007 is not one of consolidation but of decline. Third, the 2023 election is not an extension but a contraction, particularly in the Senate, where women were elected to only 3 seats, or 2.8 per cent of the seats filled. In the House, 14 women were elected, representing 3.9 per cent of occupied seats when the legislature opened (IPU, 2023a, 2023b; Iruke, 2024). An additional aspect of analytical significance is that the public series are not stable across all election years, and certain years, such as 2011, have archived numbers that vary depending on the method used to calculate them: either direct counts of the post-election period, subsequent reruns, or updated chamber composition. The very existence of that discrepancy is an eye-opener. It indicates that the gains by women in Nigeria are usually too shallow to sustain after election adjustments, judicial campaigns, vacancies, and partisan politics. That is, it is not only that the representation of women is low; it is also institutionally weak (IPU, 2011a, 2011b; Iruke, 2024).

As reported by Iruke (2024), during the build-up to the 2023 elections, about 360 women competed for various Federal political seats in Nigeria. Only one woman contested the presidential office, 92



competed for Senatorial posts, 286 for the House of Representatives, 25 for Governorship, and 102 for Deputy Governors (Alabi, 2022). According to INEC (2023), modern intra-party politics has not given significant attention to women in Nigeria. Even prominent political parties fail to provide women with the opportunity to compete in national elections. In the 2023 general elections, there was just one female presidential candidate: Ojei Princess Chichi, representing the Allied Peoples Movement (APM), a minor political party. In the remaining contested major positions, women's representation was as follows: 0% for Vice President, 6% for Governor, 24% for Deputy Governor, 8% for the Senate, 9% for the House of Representatives, and 10% for the State House of Assembly. Entrusting women in the party with candidature for positions may serve as an initial step (Oluyemi, 2016). However, at this juncture, women are already absent. Table 2 below summarises women's presence in significant elected (Executive and legislative) offices since 1999:

Table 2: Nigerian Women in Elective Positions Since 1999

Year	Senate	Total seats	House of Representative	Total seats	Governor	Total seats	Deputy Governor	Total seats	Vice president	Total seats	President	Total seats
1999	3	109	12	360	0	36	1	36	0	1	0	1
2003	4	109	21	360	0	36	2	36	0	1	0	1
2007	9	109	25	360	1	36	6	36	0	1	0	1
2011	7	109	26	360	0	36	3	36	0	1	0	1
2015	8	109	22	360	0	36	4	36	0	1	0	1
2019	8	109	13	360	0	36	3	36	0	1	0	1
2023	4	109	17	360	0	36	8	36	0	1	0	1

Created with Datawrapper

Iruke (2024)

On the legislative level, Table 2 indicates that 1999 marked the commencement of female representation in governance in Nigeria. The nation has merely 3 female senators among 109 available seats and 12 women in the 360-seat House of Representatives. Only one woman held the position of deputy governor. No woman has ever held the roles of Governor, Vice President, or President. In 2003, a slight rise in women's involvement in leadership roles was noted, omitting the roles of governors, vice president, and president. In 2007, Nigeria witnessed a historic event with the inauguration of its first and only female Governor, coinciding with a significant increase in women occupying deputy governor and legislative roles. That year signified the nation's peak representation of women in governance. Nonetheless, the ensuing electoral years of 2011, 2015, and 2019 saw a discouraging decline in women's representation in leadership positions. Despite a modest increase in the number of female deputy governors in 2023, women's representation in parliament remains disturbingly inadequate.

Political Bottlenecks, Barriers and Exclusion of Women in Nigerian Politics

The other significant discovery of this research is that of systemic exclusion and bottlenecks. The second important finding is exclusion that occurs before the voting process itself. Women cannot only lose in contested elections; they are not even being manufactured as viable candidates in the first place. Although only one woman ran for president in the run-up to the 2023 elections, 92 ran for the Senate, 286 for the House of Representatives, 25 for Governor, and 102 for deputy governor, all at the federal level. No woman was running as a vice president, six per cent as Governor, twenty-four per cent as deputy governor, eight per cent as the Senate and nine per cent as the House of Representatives (Iruke, 2024). There are too few women running for important seats. This tendency is much more visible when 2019 and 2023 are compared with each other.

Table 3: Candidate-to-seat conversion for women in federal legislative elections

Election year	Chamber	Female candidates	Female candidates (%)	Women elected	Approx. success rate
2019	Senate	232	12.2%	7	3.0%



Election year	Chamber	Female candidates	Female candidates (%)	Women elected	Approx. success rate
2019	House of Representatives	528	10.1%	12–13*	2.3–2.5%
2023	Senate	92	—	3	3.3%
2023	House of Representatives	286	—	14	4.9%

* IPU records 12 women initially elected in the House in 2019, later rising to 13 after repeated elections and seat adjustments.

Data gathered from Table 3 generates a significant analytical finding. The success rate of women in the House in 2023 at first sight seems to be a bit better than in 2019. Nevertheless, this does not point to a gender breakthrough. The final detail is that the absolute number of women on the ballot failed particularly in the Senate and the House. In other words, there were even fewer women who came to the stage of candidacy. The 2023 result thus indicates a tighter recruitment pipeline rather than a more open system. This confirmed that party gatekeeping and candidate selection are the decisive arenas in which women are initially excluded (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023; CDD, 2021; Iruke, 2024). It is also indicated that the smaller parties have failed to serve as a long-term path to inclusion. In the previous analysis of CDD, it was found that numerous female candidates were concentrated on the so-called third parties, which were not very strong in elections, and thus descriptive representation of women did not yield seats. In comparison, the ruling parties were still the primary entry points to power but also the least accommodating to women when it came to meaningful nominations (CDD, 2021).

The qualitative strand builds on the statistical image by demonstrating how women face obstacles and exclusion within party and electoral processes. The interview-based research of Ette and Akpan-Obong (2023) is particularly useful since it records the personal narratives of women in politics, or rather, their inability to access politics, in the semi-structured interview, where four common constraints were noted by the women; bullying and intimidation, patriarchal party structures, lack of finances, and the politics of insult. It is a very consistent typology, with institutional and socio-cultural barriers found in the broader Nigerian scholarship (Ette and Akpan-Obong, 2023; Likinyo and Arum, 2025).

Table 4: Qualitative themes from Interviewed Respondents

Theme	Very short published respondent excerpt	Analytical implication
Intimidation and coercion	“no vacancy”	Women are discouraged even after entering party contests.
Tokenistic inclusion	“woman leader”	Women are assigned mobilisation roles, not decision-making roles.
Gatekeeping by elites	“space begins to narrow”	Visibility triggers resistance when women approach real power.
Symbolic access without influence	“you can talk”	Presence does not automatically yield substantive representation.

Fieldwork, 2025.

These qualitative descriptions are not embellished anecdotes; they describe how the numerical trend works. To illustrate this, one of the respondents explained the effect of women who gain momentum: space becomes narrow, whereas another noticed that women are invited to the political house but not to its decision rooms. These stories demonstrate that access is not absolute and may be cancelled. Women can be seen, but, again, this can be symbolic unless they have the support of informal patronage networks that support male careers (Joshua and Adesina, 2025; Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023). A second process is intimidation and bullying during the interviews, women described being pressured to withdraw, being locked out by distorted primary processes and in extreme instances, being subjected to violence and danger. These results support the view that elections in Nigeria are not places of free and fair competition but highly mediated affairs, influenced by godfathers, coercive bargaining, and informal elite deals. When interpreted in this manner, the phenomenon of women's underrepresentation



does not seem to be a manifestation of a low rate of participation as much as the outcome of institutional disqualification (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023).

The fact that emerged from the interview sessions also demonstrates that the main institutional bottleneck is the political parties. Women are usually accommodated in the periphery positions in party structures but are never included in the executive levels where nominations, alliances and strategic decisions are made. It is not merely an issue of entry into politics, but entry into the commanding heights of party organisation. The CDD 2024 report supports this finding vehemently by claiming that the 2023 internal party politics did not meaningfully prioritising women's access to major tickets (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023; Iruke, 2024).

In the interview-based data, both the women politicians as well as the male allies emphasised that Nigerian politics is highly monetised. The viability of the campaign relies on nomination charges, logistics, patronage and the capacity to sustain the presence of a political network in the long run. One of the respondents offered a simple formulation of the problem: politics is about money, and women are poorly positioned within the structure due to their relative lack of assets, collateral, and access to political financiers. It is not only personal poverty that is important here; rather, the gendered allocation of economic and patron resources in the broader political economy. This interpretation is supported by the quantitative evidence. There were only 12.2% of Senate candidates and 10.1% of House candidates in 2019. By 2023, the absolute figures had further decreased in major federal races. These statistics indicate that the commercialisation of candidacy and the concentration of nominations in elite political systems jointly reduce the pipeline even before voters make a choice. The result, therefore, is consistent with the political recruitment theory: with male dominance in the selectorate and capital-intensive candidacy, the descriptive representation of women will not increase, even under formally democratic principles (IPU, 2019a, 2019b; Iruke, 2024).

Another discovery is that Nigeria lacks effective institutional mechanisms to disrupt such exclusionary processes. The IPU chamber data show that Nigeria reserves no seats for women and has no women's quota in parliament. It is important because, when the system is already predisposed toward elite brokerage, weak internal party democracy, and gendered social norms, the lack of corrective mechanisms that would be binding would expose women to the full impact of informal exclusion (IPU, 2025a, 2025b). In part, it is why the 35% affirmative-action goal in the National Gender Policy has been left more of a hypothetical aspiration. Devoid of legal enforceability, party-level adherence and constitutional reservation mechanisms, gender commitments turn into normative signals as opposed to redistributive tools of political authority. It is the resultant cycle observed in the data: women are symbolically encouraged but not institutionally locked (Likinyo & Arum, 2025; Iruke, 2024).

The last analytical conclusion is that low female representation is not only about numbers. The qualitative data indicate that the few women who do make the entry are relegated to welfare or mobilisation roles, while the large policy and agenda-setting decisions are dominated by men. This is one of the reasons descriptive presence is not always translated into substantive influence. When women are concentrated in politically peripheral positions, they will not be able to redefine governance outcomes even after their formal assumption of office (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023). This is the area of the data that relates most to governance. The lack of women in legislative and executive branches narrows the scope of interests and experiences in state decision-making. It also influences the legitimacy of democratic consolidation per se. A democracy in which one half of the population is consistently underrepresented in candidate recruitment, in parliamentary representation, and in executive leadership can hardly be said to be inclusively representative. The Nigerian situation thus exposes a twofold shortage: representation shortage and governance shortage (Iruke, 2024; IPU, 2023a, 2023b).

Discussions

This study has shown that the political underrepresentation of women in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria is not a transient or occasional phenomenon, but rather structural within the country's political institutions. Consistent with the objectives of the study, the analysis shows that the idea of the continuation of democratic governance since the year 1999 has not been translated into gender-inclusive political power. Rather, women are peripheral participants in critical decision-making arenas, which proves that the continuation of democracy does not necessarily lead to representational equity (Iruke, 2024; Kenny, 2014).



According to the Feminist Institutionalism (FI) approach, such results are attributed to the gendered politics of Nigerian political institutions. FI assumes that institutions are not neutral but are constructed in ways determined by formal rules and informal norms that favour some actors over others (Mackay et al., 2010). The results indicate that although formal democratic institutions, i.e., elections and party systems, may be in place, they are supported by informal institutions, i.e., patronage networks, elite gatekeeping, and patriarchal norms. These informal institutions discriminate against women systematically by limiting their access to candidacy, party nomination and leadership positions. As a result, the marginalisation of women is perpetuated throughout electoral periods, thereby supporting the prevalence of male rule in government (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023).

The research is also consistent with the theory of political recruitment, specifically the supply-and-demand theory, according to which the choice of candidates is determined by both aspirants and party selectors (Lovenduski, 2016). The evidence shows that the Nigerian political parties are regarded as gatekeepers and they sieve out women even before elections take place. This implies that the issue of underrepresentation of women cannot be explained by the fact that women are not able to compete in elections, but rather it should be seen as a result of gendered recruitment systems that are entrenched in party systems.

Moreover, the results carry significant implications for the theory of political representation, especially for the differentiation between descriptive and substantive representation (Dovi, 2015). Although political institutions are characterised by low numbers of women, the more important point is that the influence of elected women is not very strong. This is because the isolation of women in the legislative and executive systems limits their potential to influence policy outcomes and, in turn, substantive representation. This implies that more women in office is not only warranted but also required; institutional changes should also address the distribution of power in political systems.

Lastly, the lack of viable institutional mechanisms, including gender quotas, also advances inequality. Gender disparities are allowed to exist in a political system that is already defined by structural barriers. In general, the study finds that political exclusion of women in Nigeria results from institutionalised gendered power, and any significant change is impossible without structural adjustments and the restructuring of norms governing women's participation in politics (Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the dynamics of gender, power, and political representation in the fourth republic of Nigeria (1999-2023) using a hybrid research approach grounded in feminist institutionalism and political representation theory. The results show that the continuing underrepresentation of women in the Nigerian political system has not only been an incidental phenomenon but also a product of individual-level constraints; rather, it is institutionalised within the political system's structure. Even with 20 years of continuous democracy, the political arena in Nigeria remains highly dominated by men. The proportion of women in elective offices, especially in the National Assembly and the executive, has been very low, and no woman has been elected as President, Vice-President, or Governor during the period of review. More importantly, the research indicates that the issue is not just a matter of numerical exclusion but also limited access to substantive decision-making authority, even for women who have reached political office.

The discussion supports the key principles of feminist institutionalism that political institutions are gendered and that both formal and informal practices are interconnected to maintain unequal power relations (Kenny, 2014; Mackay et al., 2010). Patronage networks, party gatekeeping, and patriarchal norms are examples of informal institutions in Nigeria, which have a decisive role in determining political outcomes. These relations hinder women's candidacy, electoral victories, and control over the system of governance. Moreover, the paper has emphasised the importance of political parties as gatekeepers in the recruitment and selection of candidates. The supply-and-demand model of political recruitment highlights that the lack of women's participation is not the only cause of underrepresentation but rather an indication of bias in the system of candidate selection (Lovenduski, 2016). This discovery changes the analytical emphasis of individual agency to institutional constraints.

In the political representation theory, the study shows that low descriptive representation has a direct ramification on substantive representation. The political marginality of women limits the diversity of



views in the policymaking process and weakens the government's responsiveness to gender-related issues (Dovi, 2015). Therefore, the marginalisation of women is not only a gender inequality problem but also a larger democratic shortage. Overall, the paper summarises that the Fourth Republic in Nigeria is paradoxical in terms of its continuity in democracy without representation. The issue of gender inequality in governance remains pertinent and therefore calls for structural change rather than incremental reforms.

Recommendations

The current marginalisation of women in political representation and governance in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria must be addressed through a multi-layered approach that encompasses both institutional and socio-cultural frameworks. The results of this paper make it clear that a gradual or symbolic intervention is not enough; instead, a planned political system reorganisation is needed to facilitate significant gender inclusion. The first point of departure is the institutionalisation of gender quotas in the politics of Nigeria. Since this structural obstacle to women's election to political office is in place, the introduction of legally binding quotas, either through a constitutional amendment or an electoral reform, would serve as a remedial tool to increase descriptive representation of women. Comparative evidence shows that quota systems, when properly enforced, can greatly enhance women's involvement in legislative institutions and in executive roles (Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016). In the Nigerian setting, quotas would not only enhance the numerical representation of women but also defy the long-held stereotypes, which make politics a sphere of men.

Intimately connected with this is the necessity of fundamental changes in the structure of the political parties. Political parties remain the main gatekeepers of political participation, and their internal processes decisively shape electoral outcomes. In this regard, parties must implement internal gender quotas to select candidates and leaders, and transparent, democratic nomination procedures. It is important to minimise the impact of informal gatekeeping systems, including patronage networks and elite control, which help to establish a more inclusive political system. Unless the party level is reformed, there is little likelihood that the wider electoral reforms would make a difference.

Besides this, the economic obstacles to political involvement need to be addressed systematically as well. Nigeria has experienced a highly closed political system, characterised by the monetisation of politics, where one must have substantial financial resources to gain access to political office. Women, being more disadvantaged than the rest in terms of economic capital, can therefore compete less effectively. To curb it, laws limiting nomination fees and election expenses should be established and enforced to the letter. Moreover, specific financial support programs, such as public funding programs or subsidies for female nominees, might be used to level the playing field and increase female electoral competitiveness. In addition to institutional changes, there is an urgent need to reinforce the current legal and policy frameworks that foster gender equality. Although Nigeria has implemented measures such as the National Gender Policy, the lack of enforcement and poor implementation have compromised them. It is critical to convert these policies into legally binding instruments with clear accountability mechanisms, thereby transforming gender commitments into tangible results. This must be not only legislative but it must also involve a political commitment in both the federal and state levels.

It is also imperative that there be capacity-building and political empowerment programs targeting women. The increase in women in politics is not only a question of access but also of preparedness and encouragement. Women can be trained and empowered to overcome the challenges of political competition through leadership development programs, mentorship networks, and other training programs, thereby gaining the skills, confidence, and resources to do so. Civil society groups, international development partners, and academic institutions can play a significant role in supporting these efforts and providing an enabling environment in which women can exercise their political roles. Nevertheless, structural and institutional changes should be supported by trying to solve the socio-cultural issues that lie behind gender inequality in politics. Gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms still impact the societal views towards leaders and tend to deter women in their way towards political careers and restrict people in their recognition of female leaders. There is therefore a need for long-term strategies that will transform these norms. Some ways to change society's attitude and foster a more



inclusive perception of political leadership include public awareness campaigns, educational reforms, and media advocacy.

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