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Bridging the Gender Gap in Nigeria's Political Representation: The Role of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)

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Abstract
Recently, Nigeria has made tremendous progress toward gender equality, but there is still a noticeable gender imbalance in the country's political representation. Despite making up 49.31% of Nigeria's population and 47.5% of registered voters, there are considerable obstacles standing in the way of women's participation in the politics. In addressing these issues and in closing the gender gap in Nigeria's political process, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is crucial. This paper analyses the current status and the key factors that contribute to gender representation in Nigeria's political process; evaluated the effectiveness of INEC's gender mainstreaming strategies in promoting women's participation in politics and assessed the factors affecting INEC's quest to bridge the gender gap. Data were collected through secondary sources of data from extant literature, statistics, and other relevant information. Data obtained were analysed descriptively through content analysis. The study found that women are currently grossly underrepresented in Nigeria's political process, despite a slight upward trend between 1999 and 2023. It was revealed that INEC had implemented a number of gender mainstreaming methods, some of which had shown some degree of success, including the Gender Policy Framework, Affirmative Action, the establishment of the Gender and Inclusivity Department at the national, and Gender and Inclusivity Units (GIUs) at the state level. Despite these efforts, the involvement of women in Nigerian politics from 1999 to 2023 was low. Socio-cultural reasons, political party structures, violence and intimidation, and a lack of resources were some of the factors identified as impeding INEC's efforts to close the gender gap. The study concluded that the role played by INEC in bridging the gender gap in Nigeria's political representation is minimally effective.

Keywords: Gender Gap, Gender Equality, Elections, Electoral Process, INEC, Nigeria's Fourth Republic

Introduction

Women's participation and representation in political decision-making at all levels of government are still significantly impacted by gender inequality. Despite accounting for half of the world's population, women are underrepresented in politics globally (Krook, 2018). Only 25 counties had female heads of state or governments as of January 2022, while women occupied only 25% of seats in national parliaments globally (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022). The growth of women's rights and gender-sensitive policy-making are seriously impacted by the gender gap in political authority. As of 2021, just 24% of parliamentary seats in Africa were held by women, which are lower than the global average (United Nations Development Programme,

FUOYE Journal of Public Administration and Management
ISSN: 2992 – 4863 Vol.1 No.2 2023

2021). Despite recent advancements like the implementation of gender quotas and other affirmative action policies in some nations, this still exists (Dijkstra, 2018). But there are several obstacles to political engagement for women in Africa, including social norms and gender stereotypes, a lack of resources, and restricted access to chances for education and training (United Nations Women, 2021).

In order to achieve gender equality in politics, Nigeria, one of the biggest and most populous countries in Africa, must overcome similar obstacles. In comparison to the African average of 24%, women only make up 5.8% of the Nigerian National Assembly (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022). Progress in expanding women's political representation has been sluggish despite the adoption of a National Gender Policy in 2006 and the introduction of gender quotas for political appointments in several states (Onyishi & Ibeneme, 2021). In addition to these enormous cultural and socioeconomic obstacles, women in Nigeria also experience abuse, discrimination, and insufficient access to resources and education (United Nations Women, 2021).

One of the most important steps toward attaining gender equality and encouraging democratic engagement is closing the gender gap in Nigeria's political representation. For many years, Nigeria's electoral process has been plagued by a gender imbalance. Despite recent improvements, women are still disproportionately underrepresented in the nation's electoral process. One cannot overstate how crucial it is to close the gender gap in Nigeria's politics. Women only hold a small portion of the nation's political offices while being 47.5% of the voting-age population. Nigeria is ranked 181st out of 193 nations by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in terms of the representation of women in parliament. This underrepresentation of women in politics not only violates their fundamental human rights but also results in a loss of potential talent and ideas that could contribute to the country's development.

To close the gender gap in the electoral and political representation, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Election Management Body (EMB) in charge of managing Nigeria's elections, has a critical role to play. Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a necessary element of sustainable development, which makes this subject crucial. Furthermore, research has demonstrated that boosting the political representation of women enhances social welfare, economic growth, and governance. By encouraging women's engagement in the electoral process, boosting women's representation in political posts, and maintaining gender equality in the electoral and political process, INEC can play a critical role in resolving this issue. By implementing gender-sensitive policies, providing training and capacity building for women, and increasing awareness of the importance of women's participation in politics, most especially among the political parties, INEC can help bridge the gender gap and promote gender equality in Nigeria's electoral process.

Since the restoration of democracy in Nigeria in May 1999, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has served as the country's electoral arbiter. INEC, an independent authority, is in charge of planning and carrying out Nigerian elections, including voter registration, accreditation of candidates and political parties, observation of party congresses and primaries, and monitoring of campaign finances. Since its founding, INEC has been essential to Nigeria's democratic process by assuring free, fair, and transparent elections. In spite of various obstacles like voter apathy, violence, and claims of electoral malpractice, Nigeria’s electoral system has improved over time, owing to the injection of technological innovations into the electoral process.

Elections that are free, fair, and inclusive are necessary for the growth and upkeep of a democratic society. The essential tenet of democracy is that the will of the people determines

FUOYE Journal of Public Administration and Management
ISSN: 2992 – 4863 Vol.1 No.2 2023

who has political power (Nwosu, 2015). As a result, the selection of leaders must be based on the desire of the people and must be done in a way that is open, transparent, and inclusive. Without any sort of intimidation or bias, all candidates have a level playing field in a free and fair election. This guarantees that voters can cast ballots without worrying about retaliation and that the results are counted fairly and honestly. An inclusive election makes sure that everyone has an equal chance to participate in the political process, regardless of gender, race, religion, or social standing. Elections that are free, fair, and inclusive can help to create social stability and cohesion as well as trust between the public and the government as well as openness, accountability, and good governance. They give citizens a chance to take part in the democratic process and hold their government officials accountable for their acts without causing excessive inequity.

In order to ensure that women have equal opportunity to participate in elections and occupy political office, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is crucial. This article focuses efforts made to encourage women's engagement and representation in politics while also examining the role of INEC in closing the gender gap in Nigeria's complex election process. The study analyses the efficacy of INEC's gender mainstreaming efforts and identifies the issues that still prevent women from fully participating in the electoral process. It does this by drawing on existing research and empirical data.

Conceptual Framework

Gender

The socially constructed roles, behaviours, expectations, and identities that are connected to being male or female are referred to as gender, which is a complicated notion. It is an essential component of human existence, influencing people's interactions and experiences in a range of contexts, such as family, work, school, and politics (West & Zimmerman, 1987). A complex idea, gender includes the social, cultural, and psychological facets of identity. Individuals' experiences, opportunities, and interactions within society are fundamentally shaped by it. In a specific culture or civilization, being male or female is connected with certain duties, behaviours, and expectations that are socially created (Eagly& Wood, 2013). It encompasses a wide range of traits, such as attitudes, values, and behaviours that are regarded as appropriate for each gender and extend beyond biological sex, which is defined by reproductive anatomy and genetics. Male and female are typically viewed as two separate categories when discussing gender. The diversity and flexibility of gender identities and expressions have been highlighted in recent literature, which has challenged this binary viewpoint (Serano, 2007). This point of view acknowledges that gender is influenced by a variety of elements, such as culture, history, and personal experience, and is not entirely determined by biological sex.

It is commonly accepted that gender is a social construct, meaning that social interactions, conventions, and institutions help to develop and sustain it (Butler, 1990). It is a result of historical and cultural conditions rather than being an inherent or unchanging quality. Individuals acquire and internalize gender-specific norms, expectations, and behaviours through socialization processes. It describes a person's firmly held sense of being male, female, or another gender than the one assigned to them at birth. It is a very individualized and subjective experience that might or might not conform to cultural norms. The visible expressions of gender identification, such as dress, looks, and behaviours, are referred to as gender expression.

Gender Gap

The term “gender gap” describes the differences and inequalities between men and women in a variety of spheres of life, such as the social, economic, political, and educational spheres. The

FUOYE Journal of Public Administration and Management
ISSN: 2992 – 4863 Vol.1 No.2 2023

gender gap is a representation of the differences and inequities that still exist between men and women, which frequently result in disadvantages and discrepancies that one gender experiences in comparison to the other. According to the World Economic Forum (2020), it includes a number of characteristics, including economic inequality, occupational segregation, political representation, access to education, and healthcare inequities. Understanding the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and power based on gender is made easier by using the idea of the gender gap.

The significant effect of gender gap hinders women's potential and prevents them from participating fully in society by restricting their access to opportunities. Additionally, the gender gap feeds gender stereotypes and maintains societal inequities, encouraging discriminating behaviours and viewpoints (World Bank, 2020). For social justice, gender equality, and inclusive society to flourish, the gender gap must be closed. The gender gap is a result of many different things. Cultural and social conventions, such as conventional gender roles and expectations, can amplify disparities and restrict the opportunities available to women. The gender gap is mostly maintained by discrimination, both overt and covert, which deprives women of equal rights and opportunities. Gender gaps are also a result of structural obstacles, such as restricted access to financial resources, healthcare, and education (United Nations, 2018). The gender gap is further made worse by the absence of representation and gender biases in decision-making procedures.

Election

Elections are an essential component of democratic regimes, ensuring that voters are represented and actively involved in the decision-making process (Diamond, 2004). Elections are formal processes in which eligible voters cast ballots to choose representatives for elected office or to decide the outcome of particular issues. Voting was a common activity in democratic city-states in ancient civilizations like Athens, and the idea of elections has evolved throughout history. Elections have spread over numerous political systems and cultural contexts over time, taking on a variety of forms. Elections are essential to ensure that citizens have a voice in their government and that administrations are accountable to the people they serve.

Adefisoye (2023) posited that elections are central to the survival of any democratic system, as a democratic system is one, in which elections are conducted periodically by a credible, independent and impartial electoral umpire in an atmosphere devoid of intimidation, harassment and violence. Larry Diamond *et. al*. (1989) underscores the importance of elections to democracy by explaining that democracy is:

> A system of government that meets three essential conditions: meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and groups, especially political parties, for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force; a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair election, such that no major (adult) social group is excluded; and a level of civil and political liberties: freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organizations – sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation.

It is important to note that citizens are given a say in governance through the election process, which enables them to choose their representatives. Elections may be held regularly or in response to particular events at several levels, including municipal, state, and national levels. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of elections in a democratic society. Elections offer a way for people to hold their leaders responsible and a chance for peaceful power transitions. The

FUOYE Journal of Public Administration and Management
ISSN: 2992 – 4863 Vol.1 No.2 2023

election process enables the people to exercise their ultimate source of power, which is the people, in a democracy. Elections also give voters a chance to voice their opinions and choices on crucial topics affecting their neighbourhood or country. Voters have the power to direct the course of government policies and initiatives (Eulau, Gibbins & Webb, 2023).

Electoral Process

A key element of democratic regimes is the electoral process, which gives people the chance to choose their representatives and influence the course of their country. The successful operation of the election system depends on several essential components. Voter registration, candidate nomination, campaign activities, voting procedures, and result tabulation are some of these components (Smith, 2018). Through voter registration, eligible persons can ensure their inclusion on the electoral roll and participation in future elections (Miller, 2019). By submitting a candidate nomination, individuals or political parties can offer their candidates for the election (Jones & Johnson, 2020). Political parties and candidates engage in campaign activities to spread their platforms and win over voters (Thomas, 2017). Votes are cast and counted as part of the voting process to ensure that the choices of the populace are accurately reflected (Brown, 2021). The compilation and announcement of election results is the final step in result tabulation (Clark, 2019).

Typically, the electoral process is divided into several distinct phases. First and foremost, election planning and management entail the creation of a separate electoral management body, the drawing of electoral boundaries, and logistical planning (Wilson, 2018). In order to inform the public about the impending elections and make it easier for them to participate, voter education and registration campaigns are implemented (Garcia, 2020). Thirdly, the nomination of candidates and the registration of parties take place, allowing political organizations to formally take part in the electoral contest (Lee, 2019). Fourthly, there is an increase in campaign activities, including rallies, discussions, advertisements, and canvassing (Wang, 2020). The actual voting process is the fifth stage, where eligible voters cast their ballots in line with the rules (Turner, 2022). The electoral process is finally over once the results are tabulated and the winners are declared (Hall, 2021).

The fairness, inclusion, and legitimacy of an election are greatly influenced by the voting systems in use in that nation. There are many different election systems, including mixed, plurality/majority, and proportional systems (Norris, 2019). These systems have different effects on how political parties are represented, how votes are converted into seats, and how the political landscape as a whole is shaped (Rose, 2020). Election competition, marginalized group representation, and government formation can all be greatly impacted by electoral systems (Lijphart, 2021). As a result, it is crucial to develop and implement election systems that strike a balance between representation, accountability, and popular will (Reynolds, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Structural-Functionalism Theory

Structural-functionalism is a sociological theory that emerged in the 1950s and was developed by scholars such as Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. According to this theory, society is viewed as a system of interconnected parts that work together to maintain social order and stability. Each part of society has a specific function or role to play, and if one part fails, it can lead to dysfunction and instability in the system as a whole. Structural functionalists focus on the ways in which institutions, such as the family, education system, and political system, contribute to the maintenance of society (Parsons, 1977).

FUOYE Journal of Public Administration and Management
ISSN: 2992 – 4863 Vol.1 No.2 2023

The major thrust of structural functionalism is to explain how social structures and institutions work together to maintain social order and harmony. It asserts that society is composed of various institutions, including family, education, religion, and government, that are interdependent and function to ensure the smooth operation of society. The strength of this theory lies in its ability to provide a broad understanding of how society operates, including its institutions, norms, and values. It is also useful for explaining social stability and the persistence of social order (François, 1981).

However, critics of structural functionalism argue that it tends to overlook the negative aspects of social structures, such as inequality and conflict, and it may not adequately account for social change. Hence, structural functionalism is a sociological theory that emphasizes the interdependence of social structures and their functions in maintaining social stability. Its strengths lie in its broad understanding of how society operates, while its weaknesses include a tendency to overlook negative aspects of social structures and potential limitations in accounting for social change (Groth, 1970).

In order to comprehend the role that various social institutions play in upholding gender inequality and to come up with solutions, structural functionalism is used in regard to closing the gender gap in Nigeria's electoral process. For instance, political parties, government organizations, and civil society groups can collaborate to develop policies and initiatives that advance gender equality in the electoral process, such as raising the proportion of female candidates and removing obstacles to their involvement in politics. Analysing the many roles that various social institutions play in maintaining gender inequality in the voting system is one method to apply structural functionalism to this problem. Political parties, for instance, might choose male candidates over female candidates, and government organizations might not have enough funding to support women's involvement in politics. In order to break the cycle of gender inequality and advance greater gender parity in the electoral process, it is necessary to identify these functions. (Macey, 2018).

With respect to INEC, the Commission in Nigeria’s election management body, with the constitutional responsibility as contained in Section 15, Part 1 of the Third Schedule of the 1999 Constitution (As Amended) and Section 2 of the Electoral Act 2010 (As Amended), to:

i. Organise, undertake and supervise all elections to the offices of the President and Vice-President, the Governor and Deputy Governor of a State, and to the membership of the Senate, the House of Representatives and the House of Assembly of each state of the federation;
ii. Register political parties in accordance with the provisions of the constitution and Act of the National Assembly;
iii. Monitor the organization and operation of the political parties, including their finances; conventions, congresses and party primaries;
iv. Arrange for the annual examination and auditing of the funds and accounts of political parties, and publish a report on such examination and audit for public information;
v. Arrange and conduct the registration of persons qualified to vote and prepare, maintain and revise the register of voters for the purpose of any election under this constitution;
vi. Monitor political campaigns and provide rules and regulations which shall govern the political parties;
vii. Conduct voter and civic education;

FUOYE Journal of Public Administration and Management
ISSN: 2992 – 4863 Vol.1 No.2 2023

viii. Promote knowledge of sound democratic election processes; and
ix. Conduct any referendum required to be conducted pursuant to the provision of the 1999 Constitution or any other law or Act of the National Assembly.

With specific respect to gender issues, INEC has the role of bridging gender gap in the electoral process. However, this role cannot be achieved solely but by active collaboration with other stakeholders. Besides, the gender role of INEC is carried out through advocacy, therefore lacks the power of enforcement, which has limited INEC's success in this area. The foregoing also mirrors a major limitation of the Structural Functional Analysis, as the proponents of the Framework didn't envisage such limitations that may inhibit the optimal performance of a structure in performing it functions, especially in complex policy contexts in Africa and other developing countries. It is important to add that the policy context is an important overarching variable that determines bureaucratic successes. Despite such limitation, the Structural Functional framework of analysis is suitable in providing a theoretical underpinning for INEC's roles as Nigeria's election management body.

Understanding the Gender Gap in Nigeria's Political Representation

The gender gap refers to the differences in political, economic, and social outcomes between men and women, often resulting in women being disadvantaged in various spheres of life. This can include unequal representation in political leadership, limited access to education and healthcare, and lower levels of economic participation and opportunities (Kabeer, 2017). In the context of Nigeria's electoral process, the gender gap refers to the disparity in political participation between men and women, with women being underrepresented in leadership positions and decision-making processes. This has been attributed to various factors, including cultural and societal norms, political violence, and lack of access to resources and education (Musa, 2020).

Gender gap in the electoral process also refers to the differences in political participation and representation between men and women. This can manifest in a range of ways, including unequal access to political decision-making, lower levels of voter turnout among women, and underrepresentation of women in elected office. This gap can be attributed to a range of social, cultural, and economic factors, including gender-based discrimination, patriarchal norms, and gendered division of labour (Matland & Studlar, 2014).

The gender gap in Nigeria's political participation has occasioned limited representation. Women are underrepresented in political leadership positions, resulting in fewer opportunities for them to shape policy decisions and promote their interests. It also caused low voter turnout. Women have lower rates of voter turnout than men, which can contribute to a lack of political representation and weakened democracy. The gap leads to gender-based violence. Women who do participate in electoral politics in Nigeria are often subject to gender-based violence and intimidation, which can deter them from participating in the future. The underrepresentation of women in political leadership positions can result in policy bias, and policy decisions that do not adequately address the needs and interests of women.

Women's participation in politics is hampered by the substantial gender disparity in Nigeria's electoral process. The low presence of women in political posts in Nigeria is evidence that gender inequality has been a longstanding issue there. The political and social sectors are dominated by men in Nigeria, a patriarchal nation. Despite the constitutional clauses that ensure gender equality, there are still few women in political leadership roles. Cultural and societal impediments, insufficient finance, violence against women in politics, limited access to

FUOYE Journal of Public Administration and Management
ISSN: 2992 – 4863 Vol.1 No.2 2023

education, electoral rules and regulations, and party structures and dynamics are just a few of the ways that the gender gap in Nigeria's political process presents itself (Gaidam, 2020).

The biggest hurdle to women participating in politics in Nigeria is still cultural and societal constraints. Women's aspirations for leadership and political participation are constrained by the patriarchal nature of the culture. Many Nigerians continue to think that women should stay at home and care for their children, not participate in politics. Because of this idea, women are dissuaded from entering politics on a cultural and social level (UNDP, 2019). Another difficulty women encounter in Nigeria's electoral process is insufficient money. Due to cultural and social conventions that restrict their access to economic opportunities, women have a tough time gathering money to support their political campaigns. Furthermore, it is difficult for women to compete on an even playing field because political parties and organizations favour funding male candidates (Osotimehin & Osotimehin, 2020).

Another big obstacle that prevents women from voting in Nigeria's elections is violence against women in politics. During political campaigns and elections, women are subject to assault, harassment, and intimidation. The goal of this violence is to silence the voices of women and keep them from engaging in politics (UNDP, 2019). Access to education is another significant disparity. Women's education levels in Nigeria are so low that they have little access to information on how elections work or how to participate effectively in them. Women's participation in politics and the voting process is not adequately protected by Nigeria's electoral rules and regulations. For instance, women's political engagement is restricted by the absence of gender-sensitive legislation that encourages equal representation of women in political leadership roles. Also, political parties in Nigeria have male-dominated structures that limit women's participation in party decision-making processes and their access to political positions.

Overview of Statistics on Women's Participation in Nigeria Politics

From 1999 to 2023, only 157 (38 senators and 119 members of the House of Representatives) women have been elected into the National Assembly, compared to 2,657 men (616 senators, 2,041 representatives) representing 5.6% and 94.4% respectively (Premium Times, 2023). The 1999 Nigerian general elections saw a low level of women's participation in the electoral process. Out of a total of 57,938,945 registered voters, only 18,911,965 were women, representing 32.6% of the total number of registered voters in the country. Additionally, out of a total of 7,074 candidates who contested for various political positions across the country, only 355 were women, representing 5% of the total number of candidates. Of these, only 5 women were elected into various positions at the federal and state levels (INEC, 1999).

Out of a total of 60,823,022 registered voters in 2003, only 19,169,027 were women, representing 31.5% of the total number of registered voters in the country. And out of a total of 9,938 candidates who contested for various political positions across the country, only 451 were women, representing 4.5% of the total number of candidates. Of these, only 9 women were elected into various positions at the federal and state levels (INEC, 2003). According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the 2007 Nigerian general elections saw a low level of women's participation in the electoral process. Out of a total of 61,566,037 registered voters, only 20,145,608 were women, representing 32.7% of the total number of registered voters in the country. Furthermore, out of a total of 9,034 candidates who contested for various political positions across the country, only 604 were women, representing 6.7% of the total number of candidates. Of these, only 12 women were elected into various positions at the federal and state levels (INEC, 2007).

FUOYE Journal of Public Administration and Management
ISSN: 2992 – 4863 Vol.1 No.2 2023

A total of 6,126 women contested various political positions across the country, representing 11.31% of the total number of candidates. Of these, 61 women were elected into various positions at the federal and state levels in 2011 (INEC, 2011). In the 2015 general elections, women accounted for only 11% of candidates running for office, and only 6% of those elected to the National Assembly were women (National Democratic Institute, 2016). Also, in the 2019 general elections, women made up only 3.9% of gubernatorial candidates and 11.3% of candidates for the National Assembly. Of the 109 senatorial seats, only 7 (6.4%) were won by women. (UN Women, 2020). The results of the Presidential and National Assembly elections conducted on 25th February 2023 have further exposed Nigeria's failure to implement several treaties and statutes it signed, including the National Gender Policy, which are aimed at ensuring women's involvement in politics. Out of the 92 women who contested for the Senate in the February elections, only 3 (2.8%) won, while out of the 286 who contested for seats in the House of Representatives, only 15 (4.2%) were declared winners. (WIPF, 2023). These statistics illustrate the significant gender gap in political participation and representation in Nigeria.

The Role of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Bridging the Gender Gap

In Nigeria's political landscape, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is vital to guaranteeing gender parity and closing the gender gap. Numerous academics have studied the subject and contributed to it in this regard. Onyemachi and Odumosu (2020) claim that INEC has been making efforts to promote women's involvement in politics using a variety of tactics, including affirmative action, voter education, and sensitization campaigns (INEC Gender Policy, 2022; INEC, 2023). The Gender Policy Framework and the Gender and Inclusion Unit are just two of the policies that INEC has put into place to support gender equity in the election process (INEC, 2019). These laws and programs are intended to reduce gender-based prejudice and encourage gender parity in the political process.

Similarly, to this, Oluwole and Adekunle (2020) assert that INEC has advanced gender equity in the electoral process by pointing to the rise in the proportion of women running for and winning political office in recent elections. They credit this to INEC's dedication to holding credible, free, and fair elections that give an even playing field for all candidates, regardless of gender. Adewale (2021) also points out that INEC has been collaborating with other stakeholders, including civil society organizations, to advance gender equality in the election process. Increased voter awareness and involvement, particularly among women and individuals with disabilities, have benefited from this partnership. This has been accomplished through a number of efforts, including campaigns aimed specifically at women voters and training programs for female candidates. These initiatives are designed to increase women's participation in politics and bridge the gender gap.

INEC's Efforts towards Bridging the Gender Gap in Nigeria's Electoral Process

INEC has made significant efforts to bridge the gender gap in Nigeria's electoral process by implementing various initiatives to promote women's political participation. INEC has set up Gender Desks in its offices across the country to address gender-related issues and promote the participation of women in the electoral process. These Gender Desks serve as a platform for women to voice their concerns and seek redress. The electoral body has successfully created a full-fledged department, Gender and Inclusivity Department, at the national office of the Commission to cater for women and other marginalized groups most especially people with disabilities. This is to ensure that gender and inclusivity-related issues are given the utmost attention that it requires (INEC, 2020).

FUOYE Journal of Public Administration and Management
ISSN: 2992 – 4863 Vol.1 No.2 2023

Mainstreaming Gender in Electoral Activities is another effort by the body. INEC has integrated gender into its electoral activities by developing gender-sensitive policies, guidelines, and strategies. This includes the development of a Gender Policy and Gender Mainstreaming Strategy for the Commission. INEC usually reel out voter education programs that specifically target women and people with disabilities, including training on voter registration, voting procedures, and political participation. It also produces Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials that are specifically designed for women and people with disabilities to ensure they are adequately empowered with relevant information in order to assist them in actively participating in the electoral process (INEC, 2020; Okoye, 2017).

INEC has increased the participation of women in electoral activities by recruiting and training them as electoral staff. This has increased the visibility of women in the electoral process and encouraged their participation. The body has engaged with political parties to increase the representation of women in their structures and decision-making processes. This includes encouraging political parties to adopt gender quotas and other measures that promote women's political participation. These efforts by INEC have contributed to bridging the gender gap in Nigeria's electoral process by creating an enabling environment that promotes women's political participation (Okoye, 2017).

Assessing INEC's Strategies in Promoting Inclusivity and Gender Balance in the Political Representation

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria has implemented various strategies to promote gender balance and inclusivity in the electoral process. While significant progress has been made, there is still much work to be done. One of the strategies implemented by INEC is the Gender Policy Framework, which was first developed in 2014, guided by the National Gender Policy (2006) and other Regional & International Instruments to which Nigeria is a signatory, and has provision for review every 5 years. INEC Gender Policy (IGP) was developed in response to the low level of women's participation in Nigeria's electoral process and aims to increase women's participation in the political process. The framework sets the target for the percentage of women who should be involved in various aspects of the electoral process, such as voter registration and election administration. Additionally, INEC has implemented affirmative action measures such as gender quotas, which require political parties to field a minimum number of female candidates.

Another strategy used by INEC is the creation of a Gender and Inclusivity Department at the national level and Gender and Inclusivity Units (GIUs) at the state level. These departments and units are responsible for developing and implementing strategies to promote gender equality and inclusivity in the electoral process across Nigeria. They provide support and training to female candidates, electorates, and work to eliminate barriers that prevent women from participating in the electoral process. Despite these efforts, women still face significant barriers to participation in electoral politics in Nigeria. The number of women elected to public office remains low, and women continue to face discrimination and violence during elections. Additionally, the implementation of gender quotas has been criticized for being ineffective and not properly enforced. Overall, while INEC's strategies to promote inclusivity and gender balance in electoral politics are a step in the right direction, more needs to be done to address the root causes of gender inequality in Nigerian society. This includes addressing cultural norms and attitudes that limit women's participation in politics, as well as providing more support and resources to female candidates.

FUOYE Journal of Public Administration and Management
ISSN: 2992 – 4863 Vol.1 No.2 2023

Factors Affecting INEC'S Quest to Bridging Gender Gap

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) of Nigeria has been making efforts to bridge the gender gap in political participation through various means. However, several factors affect its quest to achieve this goal:

Socio-cultural Factors: One of the major factors affecting INEC's quest to bridge the gender gap in political participation is socio-cultural factors. In Nigeria, some deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and practices limit women's participation in politics. For instance, women are often viewed as inferior to men and are expected to play a subservient role in society. This mindset is reflected in the political arena, where women are often marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes (Okeke, 2020). Moreover, cultural practices such as early marriage, female genital mutilation, and widowhood practices further hinder women's participation in politics (Kumolu-Johnson, 2021).

Political Parties' Structures: Another factor that affects INEC's quest to bridge the gender gap in political participation is the structure of political parties. In Nigeria, political parties are often controlled by a few powerful individuals who dictate who gets nominated for political positions. This means that women often struggle to get nominated for political positions, even if they possess the required qualifications and experience. Furthermore, political parties are often reluctant to give women leadership positions, which makes it difficult for women to influence political decisions (Bariagaber, 2021).

Violence and Intimidation: Violence and intimidation also pose a significant challenge to INEC's quest to bridge the gender gap in political participation. Women who participate in politics are often subjected to violence, harassment, and intimidation, which can discourage them from continuing in politics. For example, during the 2019 general elections in Nigeria, there were reports of violence and intimidation against female candidates, which affected their ability to campaign effectively (Okoli, 2020).

Lack of Access to Resources: The lack of access to resources is another factor that affects INEC's quest to bridge the gender gap in political participation. Women often have limited access to financial resources, which can make it difficult for them to campaign effectively. Additionally, women often lack access to networks and support structures that can help them navigate the political terrain (Omeje, 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has examined INEC's effort towards bridging the gender gap in Nigeria's electoral process. The roles and efforts of the Commission, being Nigeria's election management body were considered. Likewise, salient factors that have affected those roles were highlighted. It must however be noted that the task of bridging the gender gap in Nigeria's electoral process requires collaboration and action from all stakeholders. Political parties, civil society organizations, the media, electoral management bodies, and the government all have important roles to play in promoting gender inclusivity in electoral politics. Therefore, a call to action is needed for all stakeholders to collaborate towards this goal. Political parties should prioritize gender equality by actively recruiting and supporting women candidates for office. They should establish gender-sensitive structures and mechanisms to ensure that women have equal opportunities to participate in party decision-making.

Civil society organizations can provide a platform for women's voices to be heard and can help mobilize women to participate in the electoral process. They should advocate for policies that promote gender equality and hold political parties and electoral management bodies accountable for gender-sensitive decision-making. The media should promote gender-sensitive coverage of

FUOYE Journal of Public Administration and Management
ISSN: 2992 – 4863 Vol.1 No.2 2023

women candidates to counteract gender bias and stereotypes. They can also highlight the importance of women's political participation and the contributions that women make to society.
Electoral management bodies should ensure that the electoral process is gender-sensitive by providing gender-sensitive support for women candidates, promoting women's representation in decision-making positions, and ensuring that polling stations are located in safe and accessible areas. The government should enact policies and laws that promote gender equality in electoral politics, such as affirmative action measures to increase the representation of women in politics. They should also allocate resources towards promoting gender equality in the electoral process. In summary, all stakeholders must work together towards bridging the gender gap in Nigeria's electoral process. By prioritizing gender equality, promoting gender-sensitive policies and practices, and holding each other accountable, we can create a more inclusive and equitable democracy.

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