



Women in Parliament: An Analysis of the Gender Dimensions of Political Representation in Nigeria Under the Fourth Republic

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ABSTRACT

The Representation of Women in parliament following the "Take-off" of the Fourth Republic in 1999 has raised lots of questions and debates. Since return to democracy in 1999, existing data shows that the 469-member National Assembly has only accommodated One Hundred and Fifty-Seven (157) elected women. This is in comparison to Two Thousand Six Hundred and Fifty-Seven 2,657 men in the same period. In the National Assembly elections of 2023, Tree Hundred and Eighty (380) women contested for positions. Only four (4) women won senator seats and fifteen (15) women won seats in the House of Representatives. In over Twenty-four years (24) of return to democratic government, women still remain underrepresented in politics. This provokes the need to examine and understand the representation and underrepresentation of women in parliament. This study examines the gender dimensions of political representation in Nigeria under the Fourth Republic, with a specific focus on women in parliament. Despite some progress made in increasing the percentage of female participation in Nigerian politics, women are still significantly underrepresented in parliament. The study analyses the factors that contribute to this underrepresentation, including patriarchal cultural norms, political violence, political stigmatization and stereotype, religious factors, the nature and demands of politics, inadequate legal frameworks, and financial constraints. The study also provides several recommendations that can help improve the representation of women politically. Qualitative research method was used. Data was sourced from secondary sources mainly from published and unpublished journal articles, the newspapers, the internet, books, and reports from government archives.

Key Words: Gender, Women, Legislature, Political Representation, Nigeria, Fourth Republic

INTRODUCTION

Political representation is a crucial aspect of democratic governance because it guarantees inclusive representation for all citizens' views and concerns. However, women have historically been marginalized in politics, facing numerous barriers to accessing and participating in decision-making processes. Despite some progress made globally towards enhancing women's political representation, Nigeria continues to grapple with significant gender disparities in parliament. In Nigeria, although women constitute about 49.45 % of the Nigerian population (World Bank 2023), they do not enjoy the full political rights as their male counterparts. Furthermore, women in Nigeria have not yet achieved the recommended 30 percent representation in government seats, as outlined by the Beijing Platform of Action, to which Nigeria is a signatory. In contrast to the shifting global trends, the level of women's engagement in political activities in Nigeria, apart from casting votes during elections, is significantly lower compared to men. This significant disparity implies that women face substantial marginalization and underrepresentation in the Nigerian political arena, whether as elected officials or appointed representatives. (Ngwu et al., 2022). Since return to democracy in 1999, existing data shows that the 469-member National Assembly has only accommodated One Hundred and Fifty-Seven (157) elected women. In over Twenty-four years (24) of return to democratic government, women still remain underrepresented in politics, hence the need to study women's representation in Nigeria's National Assembly. This study examines gender imbalance present in the Nigerian Parliament with focus on the fourth republic.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

Defining political representation is a challenging task, given the varying perspectives of scholars who have attempted to elucidate it. The concept of 'representation' is puzzling not only because it lacks a central definition, but because that definition implies a paradox (being present and yet not present) and is too general to help reconcile the word's many senses with their sometimes-conflicting implications (Pitkin 2004). The concept encompasses both a broad and specific interpretation. According to German social theorist, Robert Von Mohl, "*political representation, is the process through which the influence that the entire citizenry or a part of them have upon government action, is with their expressed approval, exercised on their behalf by a small number among them, with binding effects upon those represented*". Hanna Pitkin's definition from 1967 stands as one of the most straightforward explanations: 'acting in the interest of others,' where representatives stand in for and act on behalf of the represented."

CENTRALITY OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION TO DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Democracy and representation are intertwined, in fact democracy is defined in representation. Proper political representation shows the true nature of democracy. In recent democratic theory, political representation has emerged significantly due to two primary factors. The first factor is the mismatch between traditional notions of representative democracy, focusing mainly on territorial-based voting representation, and the dynamic political terrain marked with increased intricacy, pluralism, and reliance relating to unofficial dialogue and deliberations to establish political legitimacy (Warren & Urbinati, 2008). Democracy is a form of governance that fosters active engagement in politics from all segments of society. It promotes equal opportunities for men and women to participate in political processes and welcomes the involvement of individuals from all aspects of life in shaping the country's leadership, democracy is widely acknowledged as the sole legitimate system of government that ensures fair and impartial governance for all genders, eliminating any biases or preferences. (Sunday, 2013). Inclusive Representation which spans across diverse races, sexual orientation and social economic backgrounds is vital for a healthy and thriving democracy (Teen Vogue, 2020). Adequate representation strengthens the pillars of democracy. "The achievement of democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work in equality and complementarity, drawing mutual enrichment from their differences" (Inter-Parliamentary Union 1997).

THE SALIENT OF WOMEN POLITICAL REPRESENTATION--WHY WOMEN NEEDS TO BE REPRESENTED POLITICALLY

Population structure

With a critical look at the population structure of every society, it becomes evident that women constitute a significant proportion of the world's population. This observation holds across various regions, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds. The sheer magnitude of women's population highlights the necessity of acknowledging and addressing their needs, concerns, and contributions to society. According to the World Bank 2021, women constitute approximately roughly 50% of global demographic.

It is important to emphasize that the significance of women's population extends beyond mere numerical representation. Women play multifaceted roles in society, serving as mothers, caregivers, professionals, innovators, community leaders, and agents of change. Their diverse contributions span various sectors such as education, healthcare, entrepreneurship, science, politics, and the arts. Neglecting or suppressing the potential of such a substantial segment of the population would be detrimental to social cohesion, economic prosperity, and overall human progress. On the other hand, enhancing the representation of this significant population in both private and public institutions is crucial for achieving the much-discussed goal of gender equality.

Role of women in development

History and contemporary experiences have unequivocally demonstrated that women have made indispensable contributions in the advancement of any society. Despite historical barriers and systemic inequalities, women have contributed significantly to various aspects of human progress, including social, economic, cultural, scientific, and political advancements. In ancient times, notable women such as Cleopatra, 'Hatshepsut', and Joan of Arc demonstrated exceptional leadership and played pivotal roles in politics, warfare, and governance. Cleopatra VII, the last active ruler of the Ptolemaic Kingdom, was not only a skilled diplomat and politician but also a patron of the arts and sciences. Her leadership and influence extended beyond Egypt and left an enduring legacy (Schiff, 2011). Joan of Arc, a young French peasant girl in the 15th century, played a pivotal role in the Hundred Years' War. Her military leadership and unwavering faith inspired the French troops and helped turn the tide of the war (Pernoud & Clin, 1998). In Nigeria particularly, names like; Margaret Ekpo, Lady Aboyomi, Mrs Funmilayo Ranson Kuti, Miss Ekpo A. Young, Mrs Femi Pearse and Hajia Gambo Sawaba were trailblazers in Nigerian Politics. These women effectively handled women's welfare issues, bringing them to the forefront of colonial government and public attention to strategic advocacy.

They also empowered women to make their voices heard through voting. (Agamah & Odogu, 2015).

WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION --- CONTEMPORARY REALITIES

Over the past twenty years, women's political representation has experienced a notable surge worldwide. Globally women's participation rate in national parliaments has doubled during this period, and significant progress has been made across all regions towards achieving the target of 30 percent women's representation in decision-making processes (Orji et al., 2018).

Orji & Agbanyim (2018) highlighted that Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced the most rapid rate of increase in women's political representation compared to any other region in the world. African countries see mixed progress in women's political representation, countries like Rwanda and Ethiopia are making significant progress in women's participation. This is in contrast with others, such as Nigeria, who have made little progress in this regard. Nigeria's 1999 democratic transition sparked hope for a fresh start in the pursuit of gender equality and women's participation and representation (Udoet,2023). However, the Representation of Women in parliament following the "Take-off" of the Fourth Republic in 1999 has raised lots of questions and debates. Since 1999, only 157 women have held seats in Nigeria's 469-member National Assembly, comprising 38 senators and 119 representatives, whereas 2,657 men have occupied these positions. This shows a continuous trend in the underrepresentation of women in parliament.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

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

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

Table 2: Percentage and Statistical Difference in Gender Representation of Members of House of Senate in The Fourth Republic (1999-2023).

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

Source: Table 1&2 compiled with data extracted from The Nigeria CEDAW NGO coalition shadow (2008); Sunday & Iteogu, pg. 220-224 (2021); IPU Parline-Global data on National Parliaments (2024), and author's extension.

According to the analysis above (Table 1-2), the findings reflect the dissatisfaction experienced by women in Nigerian politics. In 1999, women held just 3 senate seats and 13 seats in the House of Representatives, out of 109 and 306 respectively while there were 347 males. In the same vein, women comprised 3.6% of the Houses of Representatives, whereas men accounted for 96.4%. In 2003, women constituted 6% of the representation, while men comprised 94%. As for the Senate, women represented 2.8% in 1999 with men making up 97.2%. In 2003, women accounted for 3.7%, and men represented 96.3%. Additionally, Benue's State first female speaker was abruptly ousted from her position through impeachment. In 2007, female senators were nine, and in the House of Reps, only 25 while there were 335 males. By 2011, there was a marginal decrease as the number of female members in the House of Representatives dropped to 24, while there were 336 males, and seven (7) females became senators. In 2007, women comprised 6.9% of the House of Representatives, whereas men accounted for 93.1%. In 2011, women constituted 6.7% of the representation, while men comprised 93.3%. As for the Senate, women represented 8.3% in 2007, while men constituted 91.7%. In 2011, women accounted for 6.4%, and men represented 93.6%. In 2015, there were only 8 female senators, and in the House of Reps, only 19 females were elected while there were 341 males. In 2019, the number of female members in the House of Representatives grew to 22, while there were 338 males and 9 females who became senators. Women comprised 5.3% of the House of Representatives, whereas men accounted for 96.7%. In 2019, women constituted 6.1% of the representation, while men comprised 93.9%. As for the Senate, women represented 7.3% in 2015, while men constituted 92.7%. In 2019, women accounted for 8.5%, and men represented 91.5%. In 2023, women comprise 4.2% of the Houses of Representatives, whereas men account for 95.8%. As for the Senate, women represent 3.7% in 2023, while men constitute 96.3%. This analysis shows a continuous trend of women's underrepresentation in Nigerian parliament.

EXPLAINING WOMEN'S UNDERREPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT IN NIGERIA

Table 1 and 2 shows that, women are highly underrepresented in parliament. Given the specific and broad-ranging benefits associated with the full representation of women in politics, as outlined in one of the sections, the question arises as to why overcoming women's political under-representation has proven challenging. This section examines the factors that contribute to the gender disparity in political representation in Nigeria.

PATRIARCHAL CULTURAL NORMS

According to scholars, women's difficulty attaining political positions stems from the prevailing gender ideology, cultural norms, and preconceived social roles assigned to both women and men. These factors create inherent disadvantages for women in their pursuit of political involvement. The family, as the primary institution of patriarchy, holds significant relevance in understanding gender inequality. Patriarchy, which translates to "the rule of the father," represents a broader concept of a society governed and dominated by men over women. This dynamic is deeply embedded in many African families (Agbalajobi, 2010).

These practices include the belief that husbands are the authoritative heads of families, with their decisions being final. Women are expected to always demonstrate unwavering respect and obedience towards their husbands. Additionally, many women's lives are dedicated to marriage, often limiting their opportunities and choices (Mofoluwawo, 2014). Omotola 2007 highlights an illustration within the Yoruba community of Southwestern Nigeria, where the wife (Aya) is culturally expected to be submissive to her husband (Okò). This notion is effectively captured in the widely known Yoruba expression, "Okò lolori Aya," which signifies that the husband is regarded as the head, master, or crown of the wife. These cultural norms increase the difficulty of women to participate in political processes generally.

POLITICAL STIGMATIZATION AND STEREOTYPE

Given the political context in Nigeria and the events surrounding it, female candidates who have entered the political arena are occasionally labelled as "promiscuous" and "immoral." Women have encountered various forms of exclusion, prejudice, and diverse hurdles, as well as facing criticism in the realm of politics (Ojo,2023). In light of the political landscape in Nigeria, there is a prevailing belief that politicians show little regard for human rights. The dominance of men in politics contributes to misconceptions that the limited number of women involved can only succeed by compromising their integrity. As a result, these women are unfairly labelled as promiscuous and culturally defiant, among other derogatory stereotypes (Eke, 2022).

RELIGIOUS FACTOR

Religion exerts a significant influence regarding the level of female involvement in Nigeria's political landscape, both impeding and facilitating their involvement. Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and many traditional religions in Nigeria promote the notion of women's submission to their husbands and strongly endorse male dominance in family, clan, village, state, and country affairs. Even if women were to engage in politics, these religions stipulate that their participation should be limited to peripheral political roles (Eke,2022).

FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

Nigerian Politics has been commodified often dubbed 'money politics' (Ekpenyong et al, 2015). During political periods, it has become customary for candidates to flaunt their wealth as a means of gaining Favor. Voters, uncertain of benefiting from the government once in power, are often deceived into voting for the candidate who offers the highest bid. Poverty, which disproportionately affects women in many developing countries, including Nigeria, serves as a significant barrier to active political participation for women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **ESTABLISHMENT OF GENDER QUOTAS:** It is expedient to mandate a minimum percentage of female candidates for elections, political parties can actively promote women's participation and facilitate their entry into politics. In Addition, Awareness-creation campaigns are a tool that can be used to curb patriarchal cultural norms and stereotypes surrounding women's role in society.
2. **ADDRESSING FINANCIAL BARRIERS:** The implementation of a funding mechanism that focuses only on women candidates, including grants from international development partners. low-interest loans and cutting the cost of form for women, can alleviate financial constraints and empower women to run for political offices.
3. **MENTORSHIP TRAINING FOR WOMEN:** Enhancing training and mentorship programs for aspiring female politicians that can empower them with the essential skills and knowledge to effectively engage in politics. Engaging men as allies in the fight for gender equality in politics can also foster a more inclusive political environment.

In Conclusion, significant strides have been made globally, toward improving the political representation of women in the National Assembly reflecting broader societal issues linked to cultural norms, financial constraints, and political violence.

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