

## Women in Nigerian Politics: Achievements, Challenges, and Prospects

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### Abstract

The 1999 transition to democracy in Nigeria marked a watershed, as several previous democratic attempts had been undermined by military takeovers. Since then, the democratic process has not been as exciting as initially envisioned. The path toward democratization is not only difficult; it is uneven and filled with challenges. This hampers the full integration of democratic ideals into Nigeria's political system. While Nigeria faces many democratization hurdles, one of its major shortcomings is the underrepresentation of women who make up a large portion of the population. This absence strips Nigerian democracy of its majoritarian character. The near absence of women in both electoral and key appointed positions undeniably gives Nigerian democracy an androcentric outlook. This paper examines the challenges women face in Nigerian politics and highlights some of their achievements. Its data were secondarily sourced. It finds that, although there has been slight progress in women's visibility in Nigerian politics, much more remains to be done. It concludes that the outlook for women's inclusion in politics is promising and recommends constitutional reforms that would positively favour women's participation in politics.

**Keywords:** Democracy, women, gender representation, politics, patriarchy

### Introduction

Politics in many parts of Africa is still seen as an exclusive enclave of men. This is despite the fact that most African countries adopt democracy as system of government. Central to democracy are some appealing concepts like equality before the law, egalitarianism, and majoritarianism which make democracy inherently gender friendly. However, there are stumbling blocks on the part of Nigerian women towards realizing their potential as political beings—both in politics and in government. This paper argues that women are not a minority group in Nigeria. Therefore, relegating them to political oblivion disrobes Nigerian democracy of its majoritarian outlook and gives it an androcentric outlook. To address these shortcomings, several studies have been conducted on topics such as “women in politics”, “women political participation”, and “women political leadership”, etc. It should pique the curiosity of any keen observer to ask why women deserve special attention in political discourse. One would be tempted to ask why there are no research conducted on topics like

“men in politics”, “men political participation” and “men political leadership.” This is because the conventional unwritten synonym for politics in Nigeria, and in most countries, is masculinity. When politics is mentioned, what comes to mind is a fierce power struggle among men.

On the Nigerian political scene, women are often ignored and considered as passive participants. In some cultures, and according to certain religious interpretations, women should not (and cannot) engage in politics (Salaudeen & Dukawa, 2021). However, this idea is becoming outdated. In many parts of Nigeria, this notion that women should be essentially apolitical is under threat because it is being challenged by the opposing idea that women can also be involved in politics. The reality, however, is that women have not been visible enough. In some extreme cases, they are not visible at all. The question is: why have they remained so invisible? This paper offers some answers. It examines how gender roles contribute to the marginalization of women in politics and decision-making processes.

Throughout its analysis, this paper demonstrates that some progress has been made in increasing women's political representation, although it remains alarmingly low when their proportion is compared to men in the country's population.

To address the problem of women's political marginalization, this study relies on secondary sources of data collection. In particular, it reviews existing literature and analyses relevant documents on the challenges encountered by women in Nigerian politics. It also provides a statistical account of progress made by women in terms of political representation, especially from 1999 to 2023. Many studies in this genre have been conducted from a feminist perspective. However, while this study advocates for the need for women in public spaces (or, better yet, in politics), it presents its argument from a liberal perspective. This is an attempt to fill a noticeable gap in this area of research where women political discourse is always viewed with feminist lens. Thus, this paper critiques some strands of feminism that are more of noise-making and lacking in substance. It argues that, instead of advancing the cause of women, the efforts of certain feminists are like throwing a wrench in the push for gender equity and women's inclusion in governance.

This paper begins with a conceptual clarification and provides a brief history of women in Nigerian politics—documenting their political achievements in terms of representation. It further highlights some major challenges faced by women in Nigerian politics and explores the prospects for their increased representation. Drawing from the perspective of political liberalism, the paper draws its conclusion and offers recommendations.

### **Clarification of Key Concepts**

Clarifying concepts like gender politics and feminism in this paper is crucial for fostering a common understanding. To understand gender politics, we must start with the key term "gender." Gender is a socio-cultural construct that differentiates the attributes, roles, and responsibilities of men and women. Gender

politics has often been equated with 'women politics,' 'women and politics,' or the study of 'women in politics,' as if gender solely refers to women. Following this conceptual trend, Ethel (1984) explains that gender politics promotes nontraditional roles for women and advocates policies that address women's interests as they seek equality in public spaces. To scholars in the social sciences generally, gender politics refers to the study of women and politics, gender and politics, and the politics of gender. However, in a narrower sense, political scientists define it as the study of "women and politics" and "gender and politics," in which case gender shapes political institutions, policies, and practices. The term "politics" according to Krook (2008), encompasses only formal and informal political processes, excluding questions about broader power relations. The term "women in Nigeria politics" is used in the narrower sense in this study to refer to women's involvement in formal and informal political processes. Put differently, this study emphasizes women's integration into government roles, leaving aside broader power relation issues which might include women's rights at work and domestic responsibilities.

Feminism is the most dominant perspective in gender discourse. Anyone who champions advocacy for women's rights is loosely identified as a feminist. Nevertheless, women's support for feminism differs significantly from that of men. Ethel (1984) contends that for women, feminism is deeply intertwined with their personal identity and consciousness. As Ethel (1984, p. 104) states, "feminist views are likely to have a greater influence on women's political views than on men's." For men, however, feminism is more about rights and obligations. Consequently, various strands of feminism exist. At one end of the spectrum are liberal feminists, who are essentially liberals. Their primary demand is levelling the playing field through legal means which will in turn enable women to pursue the same jobs and careers as men. This strand of feminism advocates for gender equality in the marketplace and in the political space; arguing

that women should compete on equal terms with men (Harrison & Boyd, 2003).

At the other end of the spectrum are the radical feminists. They represent an extreme form of feminism that holds a misandrous view of men where “maleness” is fundamentally seen as violent, negative, and destructive (Dworkin, 1981). Misandry, as a term, means hatred, contempt, or prejudice against men or boys. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, it is defined as “a hatred of men.” This is somewhat similar to, but more severe than, androphobia, which is the fear of men without necessarily involving hatred. Radical feminists do not seek equality with men in state affairs but rather the eradication of men. If this strand of feminism were to gain momentum, it could lead to what some feminists call “political lesbianism.” This is a hypothetical situation where, in the words of Harrison and Boyd (2003, p. 306), “women relate only to each other at every level, not just sexual, in modes determined by themselves without reference to the male world.”

Although liberal feminism shares some commonalities with political liberalism (the theory adopted in this study), this is not the case with radical feminism which is significantly antithetical to political liberalism. In essence, the primary focus of radical feminism is patriarchy. Feminists in the radical school of feminism aspire to establish a world for women entirely free from male influence. While this sounds utopian, it is the aspiration. It should be noted that there are many people who could not distinguish between different feminist strands. They thus perceive all feminists as part of the radical strand within the broader continuum of feminism. Consequently, using feminist ideologies to advocate for women’s inclusion in Nigerian politics often encounters significant obstacles. The main issue is that patriarchy is deeply embedded in the Nigerian socio-cultural context. Advocates for women political representation might consider employing non-feminist language in their advocacy for women’s inclusion in governance and political visibility.

## **Women in Nigerian Politics: A Brief History**

The history of Nigerian women’s political struggles can be traced back to Nigeria’s pre-independence era. While much has been written about these struggles, women’s meaningful inclusion in governance remains a distant dream. During the Nigeria’s First Republic (1963-1966), only two women, Wuraola Esan and Kerry Bernice, were member of the Federal Parliament which was cut short by military coups. During that period, there was no single female cabinet member (Osiruemu, 2004). From Aguiyi Ironsi to Yakubu Gowon (1966-1975), women were completely absent. Although Murtala Mohammed and Olusegun Obasanjo (1975-1979) implemented a policy of having one woman in each state cabinet, their cabinets were still composed of top military officers, all of whom were men (Adekaiyaoja, 2023). The Nigerian Second Republic witnessed the appointment of two (2) women into the Federal Executive Council under President Shehu Shagari (1979-1983). The two female ministers are Mrs. Adenike Ebunoluwa Oyabola, the Minister of National Planning, and Mrs. Janet, the Minister of Internal Affairs (Osiruemu, 2004; Adekaiyaoja, 2023).

At the Senate in 1979, Mrs. Franca Hadiza Afegbua was elected to represent the then Bendel State (now Edo and Delta States). She was the only woman elected and will always be remembered as the woman that shattered the glass ceiling of the Nigerian Senate modeled after the American Presidential System. Before Afegbua, between 1960 and 1965, two women served in the Federal Parliament, all from southern Nigeria, as women in the northern region were still disenfranchised (Osiruemu, 2004). Another military coup in 1983 brought Muhammadu Buhari to power as the military head of state, marking the end of the second republic. Like the military regimes before him, Buhari’s regime (1983-1985) did not have any women in his cabinet (Adekaiyaoja, 2023).

During General Ibrahim Babangida’s regime (1985-1993), plans were made for a transition to civilian government to pave way for the

Third Republic. In the interim, a diarchy was in place, which involved two rulers. Thus, under Babangida, the country was governed jointly by both military and civilian administrators. While Babangida wielded authority as the Executive Head of State at the federal level, elections were conducted in the National Assembly as well as in State Executive Councils and State Legislatures. During this transitional arrangement, Adekaiyaoja, (2023) recounts, Babangida had a Transitional Executive Council in which two prominent women were appointed. Emily Aikmhokuede as Secretary of State for States and Local Government and Laraba Dagash as Secretary of State for Health (an equivalent of a minister). During this period of diarchy, elections were conducted at both the state and national levels, resulting in the emergence of three elected female deputy governors in three states: Alhaja Lateefa Okunnu in Lagos State, Mrs. Cecilia Ekpenyong in Cross River State, and Mrs. Pamela Sadauki in Kaduna State. In the Senate, Mrs. Kofoworola Bucknor-Akerele won election in 1992 to represent Lagos State. At that time, Mrs. Florence Ita-Giwa was also elected to the House of Representatives to represent Cross River State (Adekaiyaoja, 2023; Salaudeen, 2019).

The Third Republic was the most short-lived republic in Nigeria. It was alternatively called the Interim National Government, which was led by Earnest Shonekan. It had Kuforiji Olubi as Minister of Culture and Tourism. The military government that ended the Third Republic was headed by General Sani Abacha (1993-1998). Under him, two women served as ministers; Mrs. Onikepo Akande was the Minister of Industry and Ambassador Judith Attah the Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development. In his brief term as head of state, General Abubakar Abdulsalami (1998-1999) also appointed two female ministers: Mrs. Onikepo Akande as Minister of Commerce and Dr. Laraba Gambo Abdullahi as Minister for Women Affairs (Adekaiyaoja, 2023; Kolawole et al., 2013).

From the above, it is evident that women held very few positions before 1999. There were three

deputy governors, two elected Senate members, and only one House of Representatives member. In addition, among the numerous cabinet members in Nigeria's history since after independence and before 1999, only nine women made the list. However, some improvements in women's political fortunes were anticipated after Nigeria transitioned to the long-awaited democracy in 1999, which became the country's longest democracy (the Fourth Republic). Although women in the Nigeria's fourth and longest republic had, since its inception, faced a lot of challenges in terms of representation in governance and politics, they have some achievements to count on.

At this point, this paper shifts to answering the following questions: Have women made noticeable progress in representation within governance and decision-making processes since 1999? What does the women's political scorecard reveal? To highlight the political advancements made by women (or the lack thereof) since 1999, this paper divides the assessment periods into two: the 16 years of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) government and the current All Progressives Congress (APC) government—both at the national level.

### **Women's Achievements in Sixteen Years of PDP Administration (1999-2015)**

The Peoples' Democratic Party governed Nigeria at the federal level for sixteen years, with four terms, during which three presidents ruled. Nigeria, once considered a pariah state, gained a new international social, political, and economic status under President Obasanjo (1999-2007). As a result, Nigerian women were reintegrated into the global community and were able to focus on their political, social, and economic advancement and well-being. This afforded them the opportunity to attend various international conferences and workshops (Yetunde, 2011). Before taking office in 1999 during election campaigns, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo promised to implement 30% affirmative action in line with provisions of the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action. However, by the end of his two four-year terms in office, the



promise was not fulfilled. Women remained grossly underrepresented in governance and decision-making at all levels.

The 1999 election outcomes produced women occupying just three seats out of 109 (2.8%) in the National Assembly and twelve seats out of 360 (3.3%) in the House of Representatives. At the state level, no woman was a governor, but a woman in Lagos State was elected deputy governor out of 36 deputy governors (2.8%), and only 12 women (1.2%) won election into State Houses of Assembly across the federation out of a total of 990 members. While the scanty presence of women is lamentable given the high expectations, it is important to note that for the first time in Nigerian history, the number of women holding important positions in the federal executive cabinet increased. There were nine out of 47 (19.1%) female members of the Federal Executive Council in 1999. This is a sharp departure from the Second Republic under Shehu Shagari (1979-1983) and previous military regimes where just one or two women were appointed to the Federal Cabinet.

Unfortunately, the gains in the number of women ministerial appointees in 1999 were not sustained in 2003, as the number of women in the Federal Cabinet dropped to five out of 33 (15.1%). However, there was an improvement in elective positions. Out of 109 Senate seats, four were held by women (3.7%). The House of Representatives saw an increase from 12 women (3.3%) in 1999 to 21 women (5.8%) in 2003. At the state level in 2003, there were two female

deputy governors out of 36 (5.6%) and 38 female members of the State Houses of Assembly out of 990 (3.8%). There were marginal improvements in women's elective positions during Obasanjo's second term in office (2003-2007). President Yar'Adua (2007-2010) formed a cabinet of 39 members, out of which seven (17.9%) were women. This is a slight improvement from the previous appointees in 2003. In the elective positions, women secured nine of the 109 Senate seats (8.3%) and 25 out of 360 House of Representatives seats (6.9%).

The elections that brought Yar'Adua to power produced six female deputy governors across the country for the first time in Nigerian history. Similarly, 52 women out of 990 members (5.3%) made it to the State Houses of Assembly. Yar'Adua/Jonathan Presidency remains the most women-friendly regime in overall women's inclusiveness in government, as shown in Table 1 below. In 2011, President Goodluck Jonathan appointed a 41-member cabinet with 13 women as ministers (31.7%)—the highest in Nigerian history. For elective positions at the National Assembly, there were seven women out of 109 in the Senate (6.4%) and 26 women out of 360 (7.2%) in the House of Representatives. Under Jonathan in 2011, there were 62 women out of 990 members in the State Houses of Assembly (6.3%)—the highest number of women representation (Salaudeen & Abdulmu'izz, 2015). The downside, however, was that the number of women deputy governors decreased from six to three in 2011.

**Table 1: Women in Major Elective Positions (1999-2023)**

No	Position	Seat	Women 1999	Women 2003	Women 2007	Women 2011	Women 2015	Women 2019	Women 2023
1.	President	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2.	Vice President	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3.	Senate	109	3	4	9	7	7	8	3
4.	House of Reps	360	12	21	25	26	22	12	14
5.	Governor	36	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
6.	Deputy Governor	36	1	2	6	3	6	4	6
7.	State Houses of Assembly	990	12	38	52	62	51	45	48
8.	Total	1,533	28	65	92	98	86	69	71

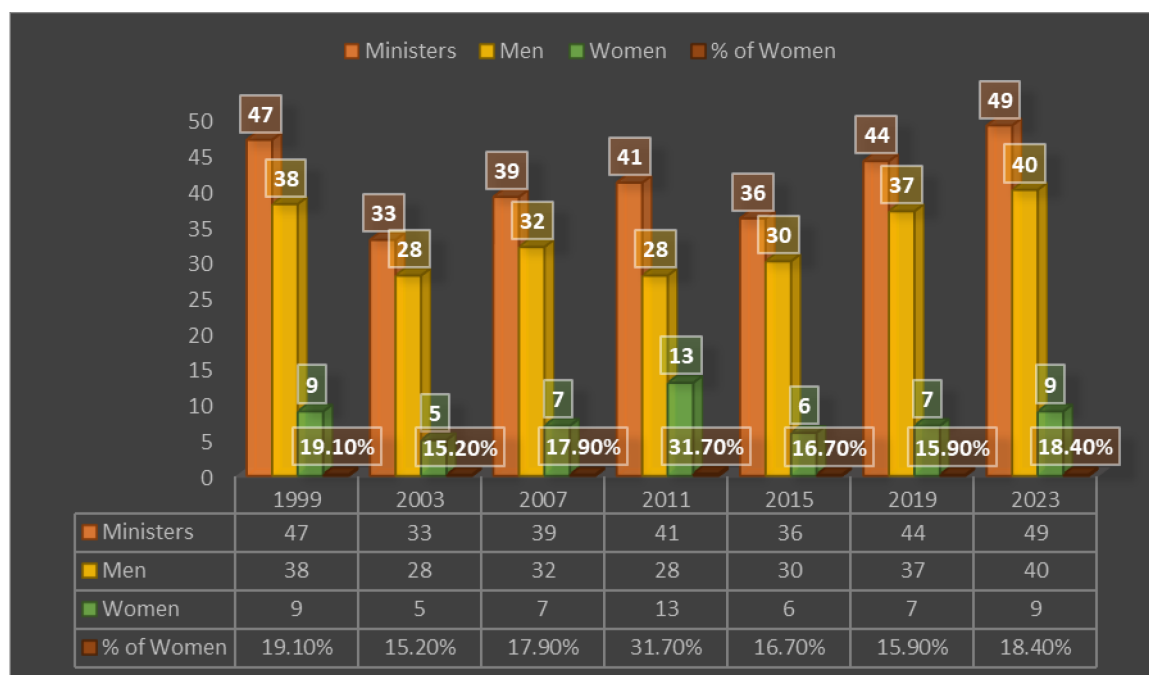
*Note.* Compiled by the author from the Center for Democracy and Development (Agina-Ude & Fijabi, 2020), and the author's PhD thesis, Bayero University Kano (2025)

### **Women's Achievements in APC Administration (2015 to Date)**

The All Progressives Congress (APC) took power from the PDP in 2015 with the emergence of Mr. Muhammadu Buhari as president. Prior to his presidency and during his campaigns, President Buhari pledged to prioritize gender equality in his administration. In a campaign, as reported by Ileyemi (2023, para. 5), Buhari stated: "APC under my administration is committed to gender equality in all areas of the economy and national development. I will ensure the implementation of gender policies, especially women empowerment, and promotion of women's equality and equity." However, this pledge was not fulfilled. Women's scorecard under the Buhari regime did not feature gender equality. Out of the 36 appointed ministers in his first tenure (2015-2019), only six (16.7%) were women. This represents a significant drop from the 31.7% of women in ministerial representation in the previous administration. On elective positions, there were seven out of 109 senators (6.4%) and 22 out of 360 House of Representatives (6.1%). Like in 2007 under Yar'Adua, the APC regime in 2015 had six women deputy governors. It also recorded 51 women out of 990 members (5.2%) across the State Houses of Assembly.

During President Buhari's second term (2019-2023), there still was no progress. Women faced even more declines in representation—

both in appointive and elective positions. Out of 44 ministers in 2019, only seven were women (15.9%). There were eight women in the Senate out of 109 members (7.3%), and the number of women in the House of Representatives dropped sharply—only 12 out of 360 were women (3.3%). Women at the state level also experienced setbacks, with only four serving as deputy governors, and women in the State Houses of Assembly accounted for just 45 out of 990 members (4.5%). Under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who took office in 2023, there was hope for improvement in the APC's gender representation. However, this did not materialize as Tinubu's ministerial appointments were largely similar to those of his immediate predecessor, with only slight progress. Of the 49 ministers, just nine are women (18.4%). There are only three women in the Senate out of 109 members (2.8%)—the lowest since 1999. The House of Representatives has 14 women among 360 members (3.9%). The number of women deputy governors increases again to six, and 48 women have been elected to the State Houses of Assembly out of 990 (5.3%). Figure 1 presents a chart of the gender taxonomy of federal cabinet membership of all the regimes from 1999 to 2023. It highlights the ratio of males to females and provides their corresponding percentages.

**Figure 1:** *Gender Taxonomy of Federal Cabinet Members at a Glance (1999-2023)*

Source: From the author's unpublished PhD thesis under the section "Women as Decision Makers", Bayero University Kano (2025).

### Women in Nigerian Politics: Challenges

There are apparently challenges faced by women when it comes to political participation in both elective and appointive positions as representatives and executives. While in some countries like Rwanda, Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, New Zealand, and the United Arab Emirates, women are gradually overcoming these challenges and breaking the glass ceiling (UN WOMEN, 2023), this is not the case in most countries around the world. Nigeria falls into the latter category. Below are some of the factors that continuously hinder women's success in politics, both in appointive and elective offices.

### Patriarchy and Androcentrism

Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold the greatest power, not only in the family as leaders and moral authorities but also in government as political authorities who shape the structure and substructure of the state. It is often characterized by unequal power relations, with men wielding authority while women are confined to traditional gender roles. There is no doubt that most modern societies are patriarchal.

Patriarchy was originally a sociological term, but it has been widely used in feminist discourse to highlight gender inequality in the political sense—within the context of power, authority, and leadership (Petra, 2019; Walby, 1990).

It is important to note that patriarchy differs from androcentrism. Although often viewed as a negative concept in feminist discourse, patriarchy is not inherently bad. It is a social system that is dominated by men but does not necessarily suppress women. A patriarchal system can be benevolent towards women. It becomes harmful when it turns androcentric, in which case women are oppressed and regarded as sub-human. Androcentrism is the belief that the world revolves around men, their needs, perspectives, and experiences, often neglecting women. In an androcentric society, men's voices are considered valid, while those of women are seen as invalid by default (Butler, 1990; Gilman, 1911). This perspective—viewing the world through a masculine lens and seeing women as sex objects—has led to misandry, or a vengeful hatred of men by women. Generally, in feminist

literature, patriarchy has devastating impacts on women. Consequently, advocacy for women liberation takes the front burner worldwide including Africa which is essentially patriarchal. Gender equality is not solely about fairness to women; it encompasses a broader notion that extends from the domestic sphere to the political landscape. The following discussion shall delve into this complex and often contentious issue within the Nigerian context.

### **Gender Equality Versus Gender Equity**

In some places, especially in the West, gender equality is accepted, even if only in principle. However, in Nigeria and other male-dominated societies, this is not the case. Supporters of gender equality believe that women and men, as well as girls and boys, should have equal opportunities to reach their full potential. Both men and women should also be able to take part in the socio-economic and political development of the country and benefit therefrom. According to UNICEF (2017, p. 3), gender equality is “the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. It is based on women and men being full partners in the home, community, and society.”

So, what is wrong with gender equality as a concept and why has it failed to make sense in Nigeria? In 2010, a bill titled “Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill” was sponsored by Sen. Biodun Olujimi in the Seventh Assembly. The bill’s main focus was the challenges supposedly faced by women and girls across all areas of national life in Nigeria. This includes socio-cultural, political-economic, and religious aspects of Nigerian life. The bill, and what it aimed to promote, was based on well-known instruments (both national and international) created to address issues related to women and the discrimination they face. This discrimination has pushed women into poverty and prevented them from accessing food, health, education, training, and employment opportunities, as well as other resources. As noble as the objectives of the bill were, it generated a lot of reactions when

it was presented to the lawmakers. How would a bill that seeks to facilitate women’s rights and girls’ access to food, health, education, and other opportunities become problematic? This is the question to ask and to ponder over. The rejection of the bill was not to antagonize women’s welfare. It was rejected because, among other reasons, it sought to improve women’s representation through affirmative action and to allocate special seats for women in the National Assembly (ICIR, 2022). This will empower women in what Lips (1991, p. 20) calls “status incongruity,” a situation where a woman finds herself in a high status that conflicts with her traditionally low ascribed status. This is especially true in a country like Nigeria—a patriarchal society—where men are believed to be naturally superior (not to even mention religious factors). Therefore, any bill that aims to treat women as equal to men should be rejected outright. The bill faced strong opposition from both Christian and Muslim lawmakers. For the lawmakers who were mostly men, the very title of the bill was an affront on their sensibilities because it emphasized gender equality, a concept that is a misnomer to them. They dismissed the bill as unnatural, uncultured, and against religious beliefs and tenets. As if to justify Lips’ “why the ‘powerful women’ makes us uncomfortable”, the bill was outrightly rejected.

However, the bill had a handful of “he for she”—male supporters—who pleaded that the concerns about “equality” should be addressed at the public hearing (David, 2021). This is where language and the choice of words play a crucial role in advocacy. Language shapes cultural and social attitudes. Though the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2005, para. 2) elucidates that “gender equality does not mean that men and women become the same; only that access to opportunities and life changes is neither dependent on, nor constrained by, their sex.” In other words, women’s and men’s responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are male or female.

Yet, gender equality sounds too feminist in a patriarchal society. Gender equity would



have been more convincing to the Nigeria's male-dominated National Assembly. While "gender equality" aroused gendered jealousy among men at the National Assembly, "gender equity" would have fostered empathy. Gender equity is the process of treating men and women, boys and girls fairly, and importantly, achieving equality of outcomes and results. It may involve the use of temporary special measures to address historical or systemic bias or discrimination. Temporary special measures refer to differential treatment that is fair and positively addresses a bias or disadvantage resulting from gender roles, norms, or differences between the sexes.

### Other Sundry Challenges

While this paper emphasizes patriarchy and the problematic (mis)conception of gender equality as major challenges to women's inclusion in governance and politics as discussed above, other obstacles also hinder women's participation in Nigerian politics. Several researchers have identified low literacy rates, religion, money politics, violence, poverty, and other factors as significantly and negatively impacting women's political involvement (Awofeso & Odeyemi, 2014; Luka, 2011; Salaudeen & Abdulmu'izz, 2015). Luka (2011) opines that literacy and poverty rates among Nigerian women are the most significant variables hindering their participation in politics. Clearly, poverty and illiteracy are obstacles; however, this paper argues that they are not as major as Luka suggested 14 years ago. There has been an improvement in literacy rates among Nigerian women who are now among the wealthiest in Africa today.

Salaudeen and Jiddere (2025) identifies the lack of adequate support for effective participation, fear of violence that characterizes elections in Nigeria, and the views that stigmatize female politicians as loose as some of the discouraging factors for women's active political involvement. There is also the challenge of "women against women" or "women versus women." Studies have shown that women are their own worst enemies. Highlighting women's inhumanity towards other women, Valen (2010,

p. 11), a woman herself, laments: "We limit and stifle the very connections that could nourish us by turning away, perpetuating insults upon one another, and stirring up self-sabotaging currents that beat us back." This challenge was echoed by a former female member of the House of Representatives and Chairperson of the Committee on Women and Youth, Hon. Florence Aya, who lamented that women are their own problem because they won't take the risk of funding female candidates' election campaigns, as 'godmothers in the same way that godfathers sponsor male candidates (personal interview, September 22, 2023).

### Theoretical Framework: Political Liberalism

Whether feminism is seen as a discourse or ideology, it is too radical an approach to advocate for women's inclusion in governance and politics in a patriarchal society like Nigeria. There is abundant literature focusing on women's participation in Nigerian politics. However, the overall trend in the literature is to use feminist theories as an analytical lens. This paper, while not completely discrediting feminism as a theory or ideology, employs a strand of liberalism. It bases its argument for women's inclusion in Nigerian politics on "Political Liberalism"—a theory that considers gender politics from a philosophical and ethical perspective.

Political liberalism is a liberal political concept of justice based on the ideas of John Rawls (1993). He developed this concept to address the issue of political instability in modern constitutional democracies. It acknowledges that today's democratic states encompass religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity that often stands in sharp contrast to one another. Also, due to modernity, the modern state is adapting to meet the political demands of women, who are now more aware of their marginalized status than before. Therefore, political liberalism seeks to accommodate these differences to promote the common good within a political system community.

The terms "political liberalism" and "democracy" are essentially equivalent; thus,

interchangeable. Mannheim (1991, p. 41) calls it “liberal-democratic” ideology since it deals with the question of political justice in a democratic society. Rawls (1993, p. 3) argues that “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions.” The existence of laws and institutions are not enough if they are lacking in justice. This is the typical case of Nigeria’s Constitution. It does not, in anyway, stand in the way of women’s representation in politics, nor is it against any other marginalized groups. Yet marginalized groups (like women) are marginalized, not because of the Constitution but despite it. According to Rawls, such laws, constitutions, and institutions must be abolished or reformed due to their lack of justice.

Therefore, political liberalism is a liberal-democratic ideology and an institutional system of liberal-secular democracy. It mainly includes everyone without exception; it encompasses minorities, outcasts (e.g., ex-prisoners), foreigners, marginalized groups such as women and people with disabilities. As a result, it promotes a system of universal political liberty, equality, and justice for all, where “everyone is entitled to an equal system of basic liberties [i.e.] the right to equal subjective liberties” (Habermas & Rehg, 2001, p. 71). Although liberalism—from which political liberalism is derived—is often critiqued as a political theory that emphasizes individualism over communitarianism, this is why it is adopted in this paper to argue for women in politics, since women are individuals with equal rights.

### **Women’s Prospects in Nigerian Politics**

From the foregoing discussion, there seems to be a bright prospect for women in Nigerian politics despite all the hurdles. There is hope for women’s participation in Nigerian politics, both in elective and appointive capacities. Although the challenges are evident, there has been a significant improvement since the 1999 transition to democracy. Democracy has the inherent mechanism to normalize women’s participation in politics. After two and a half decades of democratic experiment in Nigeria,

women have recorded some success in politics. Although the gender gap remains wide, progress has been incremental. For instance, as shown in Table 1, women held 28 out of 1,533 elective positions in 1999, which is 1.8%. By 2003, this increased to 65 (4.2%). It peaked at 98 (6.4%) in 2011 under President Jonathan, whose records regarding women in politics remains unmatched (Salaudeen & Abdulmu’izz, 2015). In 2011, women accounted for 31.7% representation in ministerial positions. This is a significant leap from previous administrations which had always recorded less than 20% of women in ministerial appointments.

In addition, women have recently been at the forefront of political contests. They have been contesting for top executive positions. For instance, Nigeria had Comfort Oluremi Sonaiya as its first female presidential candidate in 2015; she contested under the KOWA Party. Since then, female presidential candidates have become more visible. In the 2019 elections, Oby Ezekwesili was the presidential candidate of the Allied Congress Party of Nigeria (ACPN), from which she later withdrew to build a coalition against the two major political parties—APC/PDP (Mbah, 2019).

In the 2023 elections, Ebitie Ndok-Jegede ran for president under the Allied People’s Movement (APM). It should also be noted that ahead of the 2023 elections, 25 female candidates contested for governorship under various political parties in 17 states in Nigeria (Udegbumam, 2022). Women in the North have been particularly prominent in contesting the governorship position, exhibiting strong ability to defeat men. Female governorship candidates like Aisha Jummai Alhassan of Taraba State and Aisha Dahiru Binani of Adamawa State are testimonies to the powers of women in Nigerian political contests. The duo slugged it out with their male contestants, one of which was an incumbent governor, and nearly won. Also, Salaudeen and Jiddere (2024), in their study of the National Gender Policy’s affirmative action acknowledge that although women are still generally marginalized, their findings indicate

some improvements in women's cabinet representation in certain states of the federation. This fact increases hope and prospects for women in Nigerian politics.

Furthermore, Information Communication Technology (ICT) has recently been used as a tool of political mobilization to advance the participation of women in politics. Through online medium like the International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (iKnow Politics), women's interests in politics are well served. The network "iKnow Politics" is one of the outcomes of the Beijing consensus; it is an online workspace designed to serve the needs of elected officials, candidates, political party leaders, researchers and other practitioners interested in advancing women in politics.

Through the use of a technology-based forum like iKnow Politics—which is a joint project of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)—women advocates are provided with an interactive and multilingual tool that allows them to access resources, share expertise, and create knowledge through mediated discussion forums and consolidated expert responses to queries. Today, iKnow Politics is said to offer the most publicly accessible and extensive collection of resources on the issue of violence against women in elections (VAWE), including country case studies, news, interviews, academic articles, and policy papers (Bardall, 2017, p. 103).

### Conclusion

There is no doubt that the recent awakening of critical consciousness among women is a phenomenon that warrants acknowledgment. It is a current surge worldwide, and Nigeria is no exception. This is evident in the activities of some women's organizations, which are persistent in their fight against 'Othering,' alienation, or what

they perceive as injustice against women, especially in politics. Although the road to political relevance for women has not been easy, records show they are making some progress. While they are yet to be beneficiaries of the highest political positions at both the national and state levels, such as president/vice president and governor, as shown in Table 1, this is not due to a lack of effort, as women are determined to make significant progress in politics.

This paper argues that women have made some progress in politics. It highlights some political milestones that women have achieved in terms of representation in Nigeria, both as appointees and elected officials. It demonstrates that their marginalization in politics is not a complete marginalization as commonly held. While recognizing certain gender-specific challenges, it concludes, from the perspective of political liberalism, that there is a glimmer of hope for women in Nigeria as they continue to advocate for political rights and relevance.

### Recommendations

1. There should be constitutional reforms at both the national and state levels that proactively grant certain political benefits to women in Nigerian politics, particularly in terms of representation.
2. Women in politics should strive for substantial achievements and serve as positive role models and good ambassadors to the womenfolk.
3. Women involved in politics should deliberately challenge the stereotype that "female politicians are loose." Given that Nigerian culture does not encourage their active involvement in politics, women must demonstrate that they can be effective and ethically responsible politicians.
4. Gender advocates should consider using non-feminist language in their demands for women's inclusivity and visibility in politics.

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