



Between Legal Provisions and Socio-Cultural Practices: An Interrogation of Northern Women's Representation in Governance

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Abstract

Despite the Nigerian constitutional provisions of equality between men and women and some policy frameworks, such as the Nigerian National Gender Policy (NGP) which recommends 35 percent affirmative action to include more women in both elective and appointive positions and the recommended 30 percent prescribed by the Beijing platform of Action to which Nigeria subscribes, women continue to be underrepresented in governance. For instance in the Federal Executive Council (FEC) of President Muhammadu Buhari Administration only seven out of forty-four Ministers, are women, forming just 16.3 percent. Similarly, female representation in legislative institutions continues to ramble. For the twenty-year period of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, female representation in the National Assembly is 5.45 per cent, while that of the State Houses of Assembly is 4.6 percent. This underrepresentation of women in governance is certainly a national problem in Nigeria, but it is more pronounced in northern Nigeria. Available data indicate the fact that in Kano (a populous northern state), no woman has ever been elected into the state House of Assembly or the House of Representatives. Furthermore, in 2019, 17 northern states did not elect women into their House of Assembly and the two major political parties, the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) did not have female candidates for the National Assembly in 19 states. Most studies of women's political participation in Nigeria have advanced reasons for this lack of progress. Therefore, this work while focusing on the Northern Nigeria builds on the foundation laid by some of these previous studies. Furthermore, the work broadens the scope by examining different dimensions of socio-cultural factors that hinder women's active participation in governance in the region. Significantly, the work will not only explore the socio-cultural factors that hinder women's active participation in governance, but it will also make recommendations that could eliminate or reduce the impacts of some of these major socio-cultural factors in order to increase the rate of women participation in governance in Northern Nigeria. Expectedly, the recommendations from this paper would be helpful in increasing the level of women participation in governance across all levels in Nigeria.

Keywords: Women, Representation, Participation, Governance, Socio-Cultural

Introduction

Globally, women constitute over half of the world's population and in line with this global trend, Nigerian women constitute nearly half of the population of the country. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2016) estimates Nigeria's population to be 193 million people, with women constituting 49.2 per cent and men constituting 50.8 per

cent. With this estimate women constitute about half of Nigeria's population and have played essential roles in political stability and socio-economic development (The Nation Newspaper, 2022). However, despite their high population and the backdrop of the fact that strong women political participation is critical for democratic governance, women representation in governance in Nigeria is abysmally low. Globally, the percentage of women

occupying legislative positions stands at 42.4% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, IPU; 2019 cited in The Nation Newspaper, 2022), however, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union Women in Politics Report 2022, Nigeria ranked 184 out of 192 for women's representation in the national parliament. In Africa's 54 countries, Nigeria ranks the lowest, coming 54th with a 5.45 per cent female representation, while Rwanda ranks first with 47.95 per cent. On the list of five worst-performing countries in women representation in governance, Algeria came second after Nigeria with 6.20 per cent; Benin Republic, 7.40 per cent, while the Gambia and Liberia followed with 8.60 and 11.00 per cent respectively. Senegal came second place in the overall ranking after Rwanda with 44.20 per cent; Mozambique followed with 42.60 per cent, then South Africa and Burundi with 41.60 and 39.60 per cent respectively (Okafor & Ileyemi, 2023). Nigeria ranks poorly in women representation in government in this manner despite the fact that there are constitutional provisions of equality between men and women in the country and the country also being signatory to some policy frameworks that guarantee women's right.

Furthermore, it is instructive to observe that there is some variation in women underrepresentation in governance across the country, with generally higher levels of participation in the south and urban areas than in Northern Nigeria. It has therefore become imperative to understand why the political space proves to be such a difficult for Northern women's political participation. Plethora of existing scholarship on Nigerian politics has consistently underscored the marginalization

of women while identifying major obstacles against their political engagement. Thus, in the literature, several factors inhibiting women's political representation in Nigeria have been identified over the years. These factors include; women's perception of politics in Nigeria, political violence during election, lack of self-confidence on the part of women, women's marginalization in party leadership, illiteracy and low educational status of women as well as cultural and religious discrimination (Ayabam, 2013). All these explanatory variables for women political marginalisation in Nigeria are valid, but, it is important to observe that the socio-cultural factors appear to be more damming, highly entrenched in Nigerian politics and has some causal relationship with other hitherto identified factors. For instance socio-cultural factors could affect women's perception of politics, lack of self-confidence, rate of women's literacy, economic status, etc.

Thus, while not downplaying the above mentioned factors which contribute to women political marginalisation in politics in Nigeria it has become important to emphasise the implications of socio-cultural factors as explanatory tool in the variations between the north and the south in terms of women's representation in the democratic process of Nigeria. Therefore, in particular, we seek to underscore the multiplier effects of socio-cultural factors as major inhibiting factors to women's political representation in Northern Nigeria while drawing on a set of nationally representative data of Nigerian women and that of the Northern region to explain their political participation and representation in general.

Framing the Issue

An attempt under this section is to take an overview of some constitutional provisions, international and local legal frameworks that guide against women political discrimination, which shall serve as a background for analysis under other sections of this work. To start with is the provision of the Nigerian constitution which guarantees the rights of women as equal to those of men in all spheres including equality in marriage, the right to equal employment, and rights to maternity leave with pay, the right to acquire, administer, control, use and transfer property, with emphasis on land and inheritance issues and the right to access family planning and education. Aside this constitutional provision is the existence of the Nigeria Federal Family Code, 2022, which attempts to promote the principle of gender equality. This code rose the minimum age of marriage from 15 to 18 years and established the rights of women to share any assets the household had accumulated if a couple has been living together for at least three years in an irregular union (Iloka, 2021).

It is also very relevant to attest that a key aspect of the institutional measures taken to increase women's representation in governance is the establishment of the National Commission for Women in 1989, which was later transformed to the Ministry of Women Affairs in 1995 as a response to the need to establish an institutional mechanism for the coordination of efforts aimed at advancing women's affairs in the country. Thus, within the institutional confines of this Ministry, several legislative, policy and administrative measures have been taken with the intention of increasing women's political representation. One of the

major policy measures taken by the Ministry in order to achieve its objectives was the July 2000 adoption of the National Policy on Women. Furthermore, in 2006, the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs pushed for the adoption of the National Gender Policy to replace the National Policy on Women. The National Gender Policy provides for the empowerment of women at various levels and calls for the elimination of all practices that marginalise women especially in the area of decision making (Orji, 2018). The policy addresses the issue concerning discrimination of women in all aspects of life and creates an awareness whereby laws concerning women are formulated and implemented. Therefore, the policy highlights all the challenges women face in different aspects such as social, agriculture, health, political, economic etc (Fehintola, 2022). In 2021 the National Gender Policy was revised in which the 30 per cent representation of women in legislative and executive arms of government was increased to 35 per cent (Fehintola, 2022).

Moreover, in an attempt at addressing women political marginalisation in Nigeria, the country is a signatory to different international agreements. For instance, the Nigerian government ratified the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1985. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which came into force in 1981 is the most comprehensive treaty on women's human rights and was ratified or acceded to by 165 countries worldwide. The treaty calls for equality between women and men in all civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights and it emphasises the importance of

equal participation of women with men in public life (National Democratic Institute Report, 2015).

Nigeria also endorsed the 2005 Protocol of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Denney, 2011, cited in National Democratic Institute Report, 2015). This act was designed to abolish all forms of discrimination practices in all member state that has adopted the law. Article 13 of the Act states that:

Every citizen shall have the right to participate freely in the government of his country, either directly or through freely chosen representatives in accordance with provisions of the law. Every citizen shall have the right of equal access to the public service of his country (Fehintola, 2022).

In view of this Act women have been granted the same rights as men to freely participate in governing roles and also acts as public servants of their country. Article 19 of the Act states that, "All peoples shall be equal. Invariably, by the virtue of the Act both men and women are expected to enjoy equal political rights and no sex is expected to dominate the other" (Fehintola, 2022:12).

In its 2012 Resolution on Women and Political Participation, the U.N. General Assembly in which Nigeria is a member state, urges all states to:

Strongly encourage political parties to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women, to develop their capacity to analyze issues from a gender perspective and to adopt policies to promote the ability of women to participate fully at all levels

of decision-making within those political parties (National Democratic Institute Report, 2015).

The Pristina Principles developed at the International Summit on Women's Empowerment hosted by President Atifete Jahjaga in 2012 and supported by USAID, also states that Women's political underrepresentation impinges on society's recognition of the economic, security, justice, and social problems they face, and government's preparedness to address them authentically (National Democratic Institute Report, 2015). These principles are also relevant to the Nigerian situation because the country was part of the events that led to the development of the Principles.

In context, an overview of these Treaties, Acts and Constitutional Provisions show that there are enough legal frameworks that could enhance increased women's representation in governance in Nigeria. However, despite its formal support for these Treaties and Acts as well as constitutional provisions, the Nigerian government has been reluctant in implementing them to improve women political representation. For example, efforts have been made in respect of the domestication of CEDAW, however, each attempt has been unsuccessful. This position shall be justified with the analysis of the level of women representation in governance from 1999 to 2023, under the next section of this paper.

X-raying the Level of Women Participation in Governance in Nigeria (1999-2023)

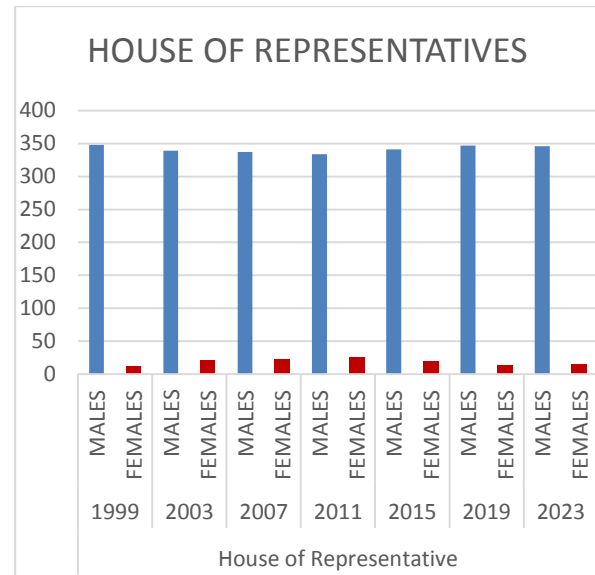
At the risk of repetition especially as noted under the introductory aspect of the paper, Nigeria, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union Women in Politics

Report 2022, ranked 184 out of 192 for women's representation in the national parliament. In Africa's 54 countries, Nigeria ranks the lowest, coming 54th with a 5.45 per cent female representation (Okafor & Ileyemi, 2023). Preceding this 2022 Report, the World Economic Forum (2018) Global Gender Gap report measures 'political empowerment' in terms of the ratios of women to men in ministerial and parliamentary positions, as well as number of years as head of state for a fifty years period ranked Nigeria as having the 139th largest gender gap in 'political empowerment' out of 149 countries (Fehintola, 2022). It is necessary to justify these mentioned reports on the rate of women representation in governance in Nigeria with the Nigerian democratic experience from 1999.

However, in order to lay a solid foundation for such analysis is to make reference to the fact that the wave of political parties which ushered in Nigeria's Second Republic in 1979 and which preceded the aborted third republic and the present fourth republic, reinforced female under-representation in politics and legislative institutions, which the Nigerian fourth republic has continue to build on. To buttress this argument is to underline the fact that only three women won seats to the 450-member House of Representatives and none to the 95-seat Senate in 1979. Thus, the trend of women's low participation in governance and elective representation during the second republic continued to and define the current fourth republic (Agunbiade, 2023). This requires further elaboration in order to justify this line of argument.

Available data point to the fact that since 1999 when Nigeria returned to civil rule, the country has conducted six general elections (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023), of which the record of women's political representation has been somewhat mixed (Oluyemi, 2018). Let us start my confirmation of this position with the graph House of Representatives' graph below:

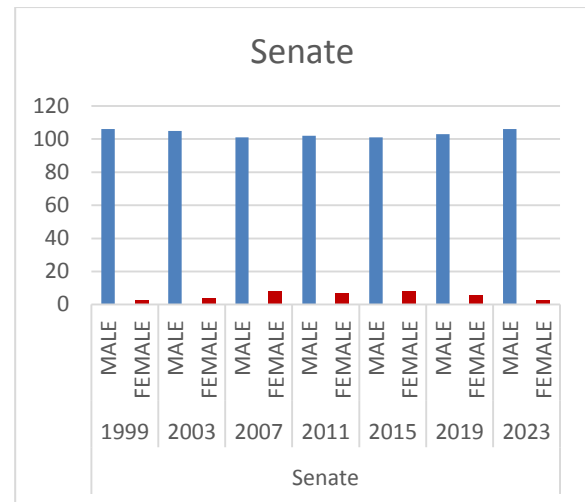
Gender Distribution of Members of House Representatives (1999-2023)



As illustrated in the above table, Nigeria achieved the highest percentage (7.0 percent) of women's representation in the lower parliament (the House of Representatives) in 2007 after the dismal record of 3.4 percent and 4.9 percent in 1999 and 2003, respectively. However, the figures declined to 6.8 percent and 5.6 percent in 2011 and 2015 respectively. It should be noted however, that following the conclusion of a number of election petition cases by 2017, the figure for the 2015 election's year went up to 6% in the

House of Representatives which was still lesser than the 2011 6.8 per cent. Women underrepresentation in the parliament becomes worrisome during the 2019 with 3.6 per cent women representatives (13 of 360) and in 2023 14 women members which is 3-7 per cent (without taking cognisance of cases before the election tribunals) in which a meagre 3.6 percent (13 of 360) in 2019 and 3.7 per cent (14 of the members of the House of Representatives were women, under these two elections respectively.

Similarly, since the return of democracy in 1999, the Senate has been dominated by males. In 1999 there were only 3 women out of the 109 members representing 2.8 per cent of the members of the Senate. In 2007 the number increased to 8 (7.3 per cent). However, there was a decrease from 8 women members in 2007 to 7 in 2011 which is 6.4 per cent and 8 (7.3 per cent) in 2015, the same 8 number of women were senators in 2019 just like the 2015 figure and far beyond what was obtainable in other past elections the 2023 elections produced just four women senators which is 2.8 per cent. See the Graph below:



Therefore, going by these figures of gender representation in both chambers of the National Assembly from 1999 till the present tenth Assembly, only about six percent of the total membership of the both the Senate and House of Representatives have been females. While there have been 181 women since 1999 to 2023, there have been 2,756 men (Okafor & Ileyemi, 2023).

At the sub-national level there has never been any difference in the level of women under-representation in governance judging by their numbers in various Houses of Assembly across the country. In 1999, out of 990 contestable seats in the 36 houses of Assembly, men occupied 88.6 % leaving only 24 seats for women, at a percentage of 2.4%. An improvement came in 2003 with women having 40 seats out of 990 seats representing 3.9%. In year 2007, women occupied 57 seats out of a total of 990 with a percentage of 5.8% (A32). There was a slight improvement in 2011 when women occupied 62 seats in the 36 state houses of Assembly representing 6.3 per cent and in 2019 there were 45 women elected which represented 4.41 per cent and in 2023 only 48 won out of 1,019 female who contested which amounts to 4.7 per cent women representation in the 36 state houses of

Assembly. It is also relevant to underscore the fact that a total of 10,240 candidates contested for the 990 state houses of Assembly across the 36 states. Of these contestants, 9,221 were males, while 1,019 were females (Amata, 2023). More so, despite the 30% and 35% affirmation as contained in Beijing platform for action and

National Gender Policy respectively, women have consistently faced under-representation at the executive arm of government. See the table below for further illustration of this:

	1999	2003		2007			2011		2015		2019		2023	
OFFICE	S/A	W	S/A	W	S/A	W	S/A	W	S/A	W	S/A	W	S/A	W
PRESIDENT	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
V.PRESIDENT	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
SENATE	109	3	109	4	109	8	109	7	109	8	109	6	109	3
HOUSE OF REP.	360	12	360	21	360	23	360	26	360	19	360	13	360	14
GOV	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0
DEPUTY GOV	36	1	36	2	36	6	36	6	36	3	36	4	36	7

Source: The Authors, 2023

The above table shows that there have been four administrations from 1999 to 2023 before the present Bola Ahmed Tinubu led administration between 1999 and 2019. President Obasanjo occupied the office of president between 1999 and 2007, President Umaru Musa Yaradua (2007-2010), President Goodluck Jonathan (2010-2011; 2011-2015) and President Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2023), in which all these Presidents have been females. The position of vice president in Nigeria followed the same trend as that of the president (Oluyemi, 2015). Thus, a woman has never been elected president, vice president or governor since Nigeria's independence. The highest number of female deputy governors ever attained was six out of the possible 36 elected in 2007 (Oladapo *et al*, 2021).

Analysis under this section so far has established the fact that there are generally abysmally low numbers of women representation in governance in Nigeria. However, women's representation across Nigeria's six regions, or geopolitical zones, varies, with Southern States performing significantly better than Northern states. For example, in the 2019 General Elections 1.6 per cent and 2.3 per cent women won elective offices in the Northern and Southern regions respectively. In both regions, women are more represented in the legislative arm than they are in the executive arm. Even in the legislative arm, regional gaps are observed in female representation. The closest level of female representation in the two regions was recorded in the Federal House of Representatives where the North had five women elected and the South had seven. Conversely, the widest gap was recorded in states' Houses of Assembly

where the north had only 8 women elected while the South had 33. Overall, in national politics, women from the South achieved a higher level of representation in the 2019 General Elections than women in the North. While the North had 30.5 per cent of total women candidates and 23.8 per cent of women elected into various offices, the South had 69.5 per cent of the candidates and 76.2 per cent of those elected (Oladapo *et al*, 2021).

Similarly, the overall representation of women candidates who ran for federal legislative offices in 2023 was 9 percent of about 4,200 candidates representing all eighteen parties. This percentage of representation also varied by region and by type of election. The poorest-performing region for women's candidature was the North West, with women candidates representing just 3 per cent of all candidates running for seats in the National Assembly. The South East represented the highest proportion of women candidates, at 13 percent for federal legislative positions. In general, Southern States appeared more accessible to women candidates, with an average of 12 percent representation, compared to the average 5 percent representation in Northern Nigeria (Nkereuwem, 2023). To further buttress this regional women disparity in representation in governance is to point to the fact that out of the 92 women who contested for the 109 senatorial seats in 2023, the only three women who were declared winners were Southerners (Okafor & Ileyemi, 2023).

Going forward, there are two important takes from the analysis under this section. First is the fact that women are abysmally marginalised in political representation in Nigeria. From available

data which have been stated so far in both elective and appointive positions, women representation have consistently fall below Eight per cent which is largely low against the recommended 30 per cent prescribed by the Beijing platform of Action to which Nigeria subscribes. Women's representation in the last 9th National Assembly was at 4.47 per cent (21 of the 469 legislators). So far, the highest number of women in the National Assembly was in 2007 with 36 women out of 469 legislators at 7.6 per cent. As at the end of the Buhari's administration, 15 states in Nigeria have no woman in their assemblies despite the fact that the Nigerian National Gender Policy (NGP) recommends 35 per cent affirmative action to include more women in both elective positions and appointive public service positions. In fact, in a report by Gender Strategy Advancement International (GSAI), Nigerian women's political participation is below continental and global averages. The report states that the average percentage of women in elective and appointed positions in Nigeria is still 6.7 percent, which is significantly lower than the regional and global averages of 23.4 percent for Africa and 15 per cent for West Africa (Tribune Newspaper, 2023). Second point to raise here is to also underline the position that there are regional disparities in women representation in governance in Nigeria. It has been observed that women from the Southern part of Nigeria are more represented in governance than their Northern counterparts. And within the Northern states such as Benue, Kwara, Taraba, Adamawa and Plateau that are more liberal in their religious sentiments have more women representation in governance than religiously conservative states.

Socio-Cultural Barriers Affecting Women's Political Representation in Governance: A Reference to Northern Nigeria

Over the years, the Nigerian political scene has been characterized by patriarchy which in the words of Heywood (2007:98) generally connotes the "rule by men". Although, women were politically active and were powerful political forces who occupied very sensitive positions in the overall political hierarchy of their individual domains in many pre-colonial societies, the advent of colonial administration with some of its anti-women policies gradually transformed a hitherto politically gender-unbiased to a predominantly male dominated political scene (Awofeso & Odeyemi, 2014). Three major colonial policies helped in promoting male domination of the political scene in Africa and most especially Nigeria. First, the colonial masters considered only men to be active in the public sphere and earn a living to support their families (Assie-Lumuba, 1996). Consequently, few educational assistance programmes under the colonial administration were reserved for only African male who were later recruited into colonial civil service and merchant houses. This practice gave African male gender undue advantage over their opposite sex and thus marked the beginning of women under-representation in formal agencies of government.

Second, the restructuring of the African traditional economies and their linkage with the international capitalist economic system transformed the Nigerian economy to producer of primary crops which were to be exported to Europe as cheap raw materials in their factories. African male quickly filled the vacuum of

producers and exporters of these crops while their female counterparts concentrated on the production of food crops and domestic management (DiLanzo & Deliver, 2019). Third, the introduction of the principle of elective representation in Nigeria in 1922 targeted only male candidates and voters. This discrimination added a layer to existing indigenous patriarchy, and formally laid the trend of marginalisation of women in electoral politics and public decision-making institutions. And by the time universal adult suffrage was enacted for women in the Eastern and Western regions of Nigeria in 1954 and 1959 respectively, Northern women were not included (Agunbiade, 2023). This invariably implies that Northern women could not contest for political positions or participate in choosing their political leaders till 1979, about 20 years after other women in the country had begun to exercise their franchise (Tama & Maiwuya, 2022).

In many societies in Northern Nigeria there is the widespread cultural patterns which assign predetermined social roles to women and men (the woman is mostly in charge of care, house, children, private area in general, while the man is in charge of the public area) which accounts for the unequal power relations between women and men in the family (Terzi-Barbarosie, 2013). In this context there is always the traditional belief that, women are made to take care of children and do kitchen works than participating outside home activity. Hence, there is division of works between men and women, which means that home activities belong to women and outside home activities belongs to men. In line with this, a study conducted by Gidudu *et al* (2014) on Socio-cultural Factors that Hinder Women's

Access to management positions, revealed that women has to do house duties, gardening, and washing up while men go out for duty and also go for further studies outside the family as women stay back to take charge of the family.

Moreover, culturally, there is a belief that women are supposed to be led but not to lead. In this regard traditional attitudes towards gender equality influence women's advancement in political participation. Basically, women, especially in Northern Nigeria are considered subordinate to men and second class members/citizens both in the family (Iloka, 2021). These traditional cultural values militate against the advancement, progress, and participation of women in any political process. Given this societal trend, cultural ideas about women invariably affect women's levels of representation throughout the political process, from an individual woman's decision to enter politics, to party selection of candidates, to the decisions made by voters on election's day (Iloka, 2021).

Furthermore, the religious practice of the 'purdah', which is mostly common in Northern Muslim dominated societies, also limits women participation in politics. Women in 'purdah' as stated by Iloka (2021) have no access to quality education not to talk of coming out to join men in political activities. They are so restricted to the extent that they cannot even come out or appear in public gatherings where men are. In view of this, such women cannot participate in active politics.

Moreover, there is also the position that women's are more inferior to men across all dominant religions, and such religion has long been used to exclude women from aspects of social, political, or religious life in Nigeria. The major religions

in Nigeria are differentially conservative or patriarchal in their views about the place of women, both in the church hierarchy and in society. For example, Protestantism promotes non-hierarchical religious practices and more readily accepts women as religious leaders compared with Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. More importantly, Islamic law is typically interpreted in a manner that constrains the activities of women. Hence, the exclusion of women from religious institutions and religious leadership may have a negative impact on women's status in society and limit their opportunities in politics and public life. In this respect, religion which has become one of the anachronistic cultural beliefs in many communities in Northern Nigeria excludes women from the mainstream of leadership. In most religions and more especially in the Islamic belief power and authority is believed to divinely given to men hence the subjugation of women. Arguments about women's inferiority to men are present across all dominant religions, and traditionally religion has long been used to exclude women from aspects of social, political, or religious life, especially in Northern Nigeria (Iloka, 2021).

Increasing the Level of Women Participation in Governance in Northern Nigeria: The Way Forward

According to Terzi-Barbarosie (2013) the efficiency of a democratic system cannot be assessed without considering the degree of citizens' representation in decisions making process. For Terzi-Barbarosie a real democracy cannot be strengthened in a society where a considerable share of the electorate is not constantly represented. A system based on political competition where inequality is perpetuated is not an open system and if such a representation imbalance persists, it will generate in the

future a democratic deficit. The increase of political participation of women in governance structures is considered as one of the basic ways to strengthen gender balance in the society. In fact, the representation of women in the decision-making process is very inhomogeneous (Terzi-Barbarosie, 2013). Thus, the continuous women under-representation in governance in Nigeria which has been variously established under this work is at variance with democratic process. In view of this, there is an urgent need to address the problem of women underrepresentation in governance generally in Nigeria and particularly in Northern Nigeria which is more relatively affected by this underrepresentation. Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2003) have suggested that in order to reduce the high level of women underrepresentation in governance there is the need to move from the incremental track, to the fast track.

For Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2003)

Incremental track and Fast track are two paths to gender equality which underscore the prejudice against women by identifying the primary problem of women's underrepresentation as from the fact that women do not have the same political opportunities as men. However, while the incremental track assumes that the problem will eventually disappear as society develops; the fast track insists that gender balance will not come about by itself but rather through a conscious alteration of the way political institutions work (Orji, 2018). While the incremental track places emphasis on what the woman must do to cope with political marginalisation, the fast track shifts the responsibility for promoting change away from the individual woman to those

institutions that are, consequently, expected to take action to identify and correct the causes of women's underrepresentation. Therefore, the fast-track approach locates the responsibility for dealing with underrepresentation of women squarely with political institutions (Orji, 2018). Going forward, suggestions that shall be offered in order to address women underrepresentation in governance in Northern Nigeria shall largely point towards the fast-track path as postulated by these two scholars.

Before making these suggestions, it is important to establish that over the years efforts have been made to reduce the rate of women underrepresentation in governance in Nigeria. There have been different efforts, especially by civil society organisations and women activists to improve the situation. These efforts include changing cultural norms through media campaigns and education; programmes to empower women through training or mentoring; monitoring the fairness and conduct of elections; advocating for affirmative action from the state, etc (Kelly, 2019). However, despite all these efforts women underrepresentation in governance has continued to be on the increase in Nigeria. Therefore, it has become more necessary to revisit the problem from other lens, with reference to the women in Northern Nigerian.

Fundamentally and as a starting point we suggest the introduction of electoral gender quota as a measure that could be taken to enhance women's political representation in Nigeria. According to Dahlerup *et.al*, (2013:16), gender quotas are “numerical targets that stipulate the number

or percentage of women that must be included in a candidate list or the number of seats to be allocated to women in a legislature”. Gender quotas aim at reversing discrimination and to level the playing field for both women and men in politics. Dahlerup *et.al* (2013) electoral gender quotas are the main type of positive measure taken to increase women's political representation and a form of Affirmative Action to help overcome the obstacles that prevent them from entering politics in the same way as men. In this way, gender quotas represent a leap over historical barriers. They give the voters a possibility to choose women candidates, which they may not have had within their preferred party (Orji, 2018). In order to achieve its purpose electoral quotas must include rules about order of candidates and sanctions for non-compliance. Therefore, to be effective, there is the need to have in existence institutional bodies that will supervise the application of quotas and impose sanctions for non-compliance (Orji, 2018).

Having established the relevance of electoral quota system at increasing women representation in governance and for democratic consolidation We suggest a revisit of The Special Seats Bill which seeks to amend sections 48, 49, 71, 77 and 117 of the Nigerian constitution and proposes additional seats in the National Assembly and states' Houses of Assembly: 37 in the Senate, 74 in the House of Representatives and 108 in the state assemblies. This bill intends empowering the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), in line with its power in section 71 of the constitution, to divide the state and the FCT into two electoral constituencies for the House of Representatives seats. For the Senate, the additional senator will represent

the state and for the state assembly, the three women will be elected from each of the senatorial districts. The additional seats will be contested by only women who successfully emerge as candidates from their party primaries and do not preclude women from contesting for the other seats in the national and state assemblies. The additional seats will operate for only four electoral cycles to enable political socialisation that makes electing women a norm and dislodge patriarchal orientations that create impediments for women contesting and winning elections in Nigeria (The Nation Newspaper, 2022).

It should be noted that the additional seats proposal is not a new proposal in Nigeria, because the Uwais Report 2008, has proposed a combination of first-past-the-post and modified proportional representation for legislative elections at all levels which included the creation of 108 additional seats to be filled by proportional representation. The report recommended for 30 per cent women representation in the party list for the proportional representation. As Nigeria retains its majority electoral system, the Special Seats Bill is reasonably the best fit to increase women's representation (The Nation Newspaper, 2022). Critics of this bill have argued that it will automatically enlarge the legislature and increases the cost of governance in Nigeria. It must be noted however that in 2016, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) observes that gender gaps cost Sub-Saharan Africa \$95bn a year. Studies have also shown that countries with increased women leadership achieve better economic growth, development and peace. It is projected that closing gender gaps in Nigeria can lead to

nine per cent GDP gains by 2025 (Growing Economies Through Gender Parity Analysis). Furthermore, out of the top 10 most developed countries in 2020 (United Nations Development Report, December 2020), eight of these countries have at least 30 per cent women representation in their legislative house with the other two within 20 per cent.

In view of the above mentioned facts and when one juxtaposes the supposed cost to the budget with the humongous cost of exclusion or the possible gains in GDP with more women in government, it only makes economic sense to pass the Special Seat bill. And for size, this will not be the largest Assembly, in Nigeria's history, because the 1979 Constitution of Nigeria provided for five senators per state and 450 seats in the House of Representatives at a time when Nigeria had 19 states (The Nation Newspaper, 2022).

There is also the need to revamp Nigeria's 2006 National Gender Policy which advocates 35 per cent women political participation. This will also assist in increasing women representation in governance. There is however the need to give this Policy legal backing which will for example mandates political parties to include gender quotas in their internal structures. Going by that, both genders would have equal access to public office at all political levels (Agunbiade, 2023).

Similarly, closing the gender disparities in the political space may also be achieved through relevant amendments to the Federal Character Commission 1995 Act. Legislative intervention to review and

amend the Act establishing the Federal Character Commission will expand it to include a gender component. This gender component could be in the form of Zebra system for gender-equal politics introduced in Namibia. As obtainable in Namibia the system is committed to filling leadership positions with a woman either as head or as deputy. For example, if you have a minister in Namibia that is a woman, her deputy must be a man. If you have another appointment that is a man, the deputy must be a woman. That was what Namibia introduced to ensure that they had some level of equality. So it led to an increase in the number of women in the parliament. Thus, due to the Zebra system that was introduced in Namibia, it created a 50 per cent kind of structure to politics. So that is what has worked for Namibia in politics and as of 2019, they had 44 per cent of women in their National Assembly (Ibizugbe, 2023). The introduction of such system at all levels of government will also increase women representation at the executive arm of government.

In as much that we have canvassed for the introduction of gender quota and other legal frameworks for better women representation in governance there is also the need to point out that gender quota, alone, may not be effective in closing the gender gap in political representation in countries like Nigeria, which has been largely dominated by men. The implication of this statement is that other measures such as inclusion of women in local and regional politics may be required. Thus, greater political representation of women should be given attention at the local and regional levels. This would ensure both a better representation of the diversity of population

and an opportunity for women and men to develop a political career on an equal footing. Similarly, Nigeria's federal system presents an excellent opportunity for women politicians to develop their skills and capacities at local and regional levels, and to use such skills and capacities in their move towards taking up of greater political responsibilities at national level (Orji, 2018).

At the risk of being pessimistic, it must be noted that suggestions under this section which requires some legal provisions in the real sense of it may not be supported by Nigerian male politicians. In view of this pessimistic position there is the need for civil society groups to consistently advocate a legislative review to ensure that equal rights for women and men are guaranteed, especially in respect of political representation (Orji, 2018). In addition, developments partners need to support local civil society efforts to enhance women's candidature and build resilience among women aspirants. Such partnerships should be robust with long-term outlooks (Nkereuwem, 2023). More so, for more impact, Nigerian women must congregate and organise as a power bloc to create a broad-based grassroots movement and push for constitutional and electoral inclusion. As a vehicle for a call to action, the women's mass movement can organise public pressure on the National Assembly to pass the 2016 Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill (GEOB) which was rejected by the 9th National Assembly.

The mass-media are also expected to be a very important force in shaping cultural attitudes due to the fact that traditional attitudes and cultural barriers are among the most difficult to remove. The media can assist in framing, gate-keeping and agenda-

setting which are some of roles that the media play. In this regard, the media must, as a matter of necessity, take on these roles conscientiously to tackle gender inequality (Okafor & Ileyemi, 2023). More so, according to Agomor (2004) given the role of the media in influencing people's opinions and attitudes, the increased participation of women, coupled with gender-sensitive education, can lead to more positive ways of changing stereotypes about women involvement in politics.

Conclusion

As observed under this work, the Nigerian government has ratified conventions and international legal instruments on women's rights and the country's constitution guarantees such rights. Often, however, these have not transformed to increased women representation in governance; instead, women representation in governance has remained very low. This underscores the fact that legal frameworks are not enough in promoting women representation in governance, except there is the political will by the government and the political class to adequately implement them given the repugnant nature of socio-cultural realities in Nigeria. This is in view of the fact that in the face of these different legal provisions, various systems of customary law, religious ideologies and cultural stereotyping have been used to treat women as minors in the law and household, with few women having equal access to political offices and positions, most especially in Northern Nigeria (Iloka, 2021). In the world over women underrepresentation in governance is antithetical to the advancement of democracy. This calls for the need to address factors associated with socio-

cultural norms which affect women representation in governance if Nigeria aims at advancing its democracy and achieve development.

Aside the above, there is need for the reformation of customary and religious institutions of the states which are repugnant to natural justice in order to avoid discrimination against women's involvement in public life. The suggestions that have been offered under the work, especially the gender quota, will help in dismantling patriarchal structures that reinforce power imbalance between women and men in governance. Researches have suggested that culture can be transformed through innovations and given the Nigerian situation socio-cultural factors which impede women representation in governance could be altered with the innovative gender quota. In the light of this, Women's movements and civil society are expected to embark on aggressive awareness and enlightenment campaign towards changing societal perception that women are inferior to men.

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