THE PARADOX OF GENDER REFORM IN NIGERIA: FEMINIST ADVOCACY, ELITE GAINS AND GRASSROOTS EXCLUSION

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Abstract

Nigeria's recent expansion of state-level gender quotas and party-based affirmative-action rules has been presented as a major advance for women's political inclusion, yet these reforms operate within electoral systems shaped by patronage politics, male-dominated party hierarchies, and deep class inequalities. This study examines how these conditions influence the implementation and outcomes of gender quotas across more than a dozen Nigerian states that adopted 35 percent requirements or related rules after 2018. It aims to identify the social profile of women who access quota nominations, assess whether feminist organizations retain influence over selection processes, examine the barriers faced by non-elite women, and analyse how elite dominance shapes substantive representation. The analysis draws on elite capture theory, the political economy of gender reforms, and intersectional feminist theory. Using a mixed-methods design, the study combines an original candidate-level dataset, interviews, biographical profiles, and text analysis of NGO documents, analysed through descriptive statistics, logistic regression, cross-state comparisons, and qualitative coding. The findings show that quota positions are largely captured by urban, highly educated, and politically connected women, feminist organizations lose influence once reforms move into party structures, non-elite women face procedural exclusion and intimidation, and elite dominance limits policy attention to grassroots concerns such as rural welfare and protection against gender-based violence. The study recommends independent oversight, transparent nomination rules, and formal roles for feminist organizations in monitoring quota implementation.

Keywords: gender quotas; elite capture; political representation; Nigeria; governance.

Introduction

Gender reform discourse in Nigeria has, for decades, zeroed in on the discrepancy between the number of women and representation in government. Despite representing a major chunk of the population, women are still underrepresented in government positions. There have been various studies carried out to determine this disparity over multiple electoral cycles, especially in 1999 and subsequent years, to isolate these barriers in women's political engagement (Uwa et al., 2018; Suleiman, 2016). Not only is it a question of disparity in representation but is linked to underlying social, economic, and cultural determinants in society, isolating who gets to speak and who gets to decide in Nigerian society (Yusuf, 2018).

Activists and civil society organizations have over time called for institutional change, advocating for women's political space. The beginning of the 2000s brought a reliance for activism efforts on global platforms, such as the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Crenshaw, 1991), as well as their own feminist support structures (Okoye, 2017). Calls for women's participation sought either affirmative

action quotas for their parties or, more simply, women's seats, which would give a more equal share of women's participation in politics per se (Suleiman, 2016). But for many women, these measures would not only symbolize a change in the ideas for gender inequality, as they sought more than mere symbolic expressions, which would turn gender inequality into legislative seats (Yusuf, 2018).

Nevertheless, the hope for quotas and reform faces the facts about Nigerian political structure and dynamics. Despite being important limitations, party constitutions and patronage networks have been and continue to play less important roles compared to others (Mack, 2022). On a positive note, research showing party practices from 1999 to 2023 reveals that vague nomination trends, economic exclusion, and structural support for persistent masculine ideals remain important limitations for women's representation despite quota regulations being in place (Okoye, 2017; Suleiman, 2016). In most instances, women are seen to play fictional or background roles and are used as convenient tools within social dynamics to convey postures toward egalitarian ideals even as they are never given actualized opportunities (Olojede & Akindele, 2020)

Socio-cultural factors further accentuate these issues. In many Nigerian states, patriarchal issues of culture and faith define politics as a male preserve (Yusuf, 2018). In many rural areas and less privileged communities, many women lack access to primary education, political mentorship, and civic education, thus diminishing their capacity and inclination to run for the legislature (Uwa et al., 2018; Suleiman, 2016). Such issues in structure and culture are intertwined in that economic marginalization makes it difficult to overcome patriarchal opposition, which in turn perpetuates patriarchal ideologies that cause economic marginalization. Another significant barrier would then be financial constraints. In Nigeria, running for elective office would require substantial funding in terms of nomination fees, organizational matters, influence, and in many cases, supplementary payment for nomination by political parties (Olojede & Akindele, 2020; Yusuf, 2018). Even where there are suggestions for reduced or exempt nomination fees for nomination, such are less likely to address the funding disparity between candidates in other areas (Suleiman, 2016).

However, alongside issues of representation, representation type matters even more. While those representing grassroots women may include market women, smallholder farmers, caregivers, and community developers, representation involves issues of day-to-day needs like infrastructure development, social welfare provisions, protection against gender violence, and education and healthcare delivery (Yusuf, 2018; Olojede & Akindele, 2020). If representation by women elected into office is largely composed of urban, more educated, and more advantaged women, their policies may not necessarily include aspirations of marginalized groups. This issue makes a point on the difference between descriptive representation (how many women are in office) and substantive representation (responsive representation on behalf of marginalized groups) (Crenshaw, 1991).

Empirical evidence bolsters these points. In a survey of 400 women in Abuja, correlations exist on financial cost, gender discrimination, political violence, and lack of participation in politics (Suleiman, 2016). Furthermore, in a case study of Yobe State, patriarchy, cultural and religious factors, godfatherism, threats of violence and intimidation, and stigma are cited among critical issues against woman representation in elective offices (Uwa et al., 2018). These issues are critical despite representation by law because of economic costs and social and institutional stigma that largely deviates or precludes effective woman representation.

This brings the researcher to the fundamental issue: even though gender reform initiatives and the use of quotas represent true advancement in institutional commitment to the cause of

equality, the current state of literature indicates limited success in changing the political balance of power in Nigeria in this regard. Research carried out between 1999-2023 indicates that despite the use of quotas and reform initiatives, women continue to be marginalized both in political parties as well as in society (Suleiman, 2016; Yusuf, 2018). There seems to be a gap between the idea of reform and reality.

This is the research question the present study aimed to fill. There is evidence in existing studies about the overall challenges to participation in terms of patriarchy, finance, culture, and discrimination, but few studies investigate the empirical aspect in terms of whom the quotas favor, the mediating effects and roles in the structural setting by political parties, and the effects on substantive representation for marginalized sections. Very little information is available in terms of the social backgrounds of the female nominees and the experiences surrounding the ground-level female politics in relation to these opportunities. There is hardly any evidence as to the effects in terms of whether feminist bodies continue to facilitate selection after the implementation of the reform or whether the political parties in general swallow the implementation and the creation of elites in the process.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section examined the evolution of feminist advocacy and women's political participation in Nigeria, with a focus on the shift from theoretical critique to institutional reforms like gender quotas, and critically assessedd persistent barriers, including elite capture, party gatekeeping, and intersectional exclusion that limit substantive representation. The review identifiedd key gaps in the literature regarding the implementation and impact of the reforms.

Conceptualizing Feminism and Advocacy

Feminism can thus be defined as both a theoretical and practical political phenomenon dedicated to the task of analyzing and dismantling the relationships based on the politics of gender inequality (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The essence of feminism is the study and exploration of the manner in which patriarchal society produces conditions of disadvantage for the female genders and an advantage for the male genders. The political aspect of feminism is underscored by the fundamental assumption and conviction that equal political participation and access is more than just a question of quantity and is ultimately about the ability to make politics and shape the society (Mack, 2022). The application of the study of feminism in the Nigerian society can enable an analysis and exploration of the mediating relationships in the politics of the female genders firstly in relation to class, ethnicity, and geographical location (Tripp, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991).

Feminist advocacy: This is the process whereby an individual or group makes efforts to support the rights of women and attempts to ensure gender equity (Delmar, 2001). It entails efforts to encourage the enactment of legislation, carry out campaigns, train possible leaders, and ensure compliance with gender-friendly legislation. This activity helps to ensure that the ideals of feminism, which are still at the normative or conceptual level, are turned into reality, for example, through increased representation or responsiveness as well as empowerment. It fills the gap between what is provided in institutions, for example, through the use of gender quotas, and what should actually change for women's representation.

There is an interplay existing between feminism and advocacy. Theory derived from feminist movements serves as the conceptual base for the examination of systematic inequality based on gender and designing interventions to correct this inequality, while feminist advocacy acts as the implementation base for the conceptual base mentioned above (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Within the Nigerian context, it can be argued that feminist advocacy groups function in a political setting and try to ensure that the efforts of formal politics through quotas and reserved seats translate beyond symbolism into an even more practical influence on decision-making processes (Olojede & Akindele, 2020). This is conceptual and illustrates the dual character of the goals of both feminist movements and feminist advocacy.

The concept of intersectionality further nuances the formulation of feminism and activism within research. For instance, within feminist activism, women cannot be seen as a single entity because of the fact that class, ethnicity, rural/urban splits, and education intersect and impact women in their own ways (Crenshaw, 1991). In this case, any form of activism that hasn't taken into consideration the intersecting points may end up perpetuating hegemony while excluding women who are marginalized in society (Delmar, 2001). For instance, the concept of a feminist approach to activism can thus be defined within the context of deliberately ensuring that efforts are made to level the genders as well as the socio-economic imbalances within which women are positioned in their political activism.

A brief account of feminist movements in Nigeria reveals that the first feminist actions started in the early 20th century, where groups of women came together to challenge the colonial government on basic civic freedoms (Salami, 2018). More recent feminist actions, following the return to democratic rule in 1999, emphasized the desire for political participation, demanding legislative representation and the reform of policies that perpetuate their exclusion. However, according to them, despite these numerous feminist movements, the reality is that the marginalized position of women has been evident even within the political system **(Uwa et al., 2018).**

Global norms have been imperative in forming the response of the Nigerian state to gender transformation. Documents such as the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Plan of Action served as key norms that guided nations to implement policies that ensure greater participation of women in decision-making positions (Tripp, 2010). As argued by Dahlerup (2006), global norms have influenced the use of gender quotas across the world by presenting gender participation in decision-making as both a matter of democratic principles and human rights. In the context of the Nigerian state, global norms have been used to influence gender agendas, which were championed by feminist groups that believed that quota systems should be used as tools to address historical injustices that have denied women influence in decision-making.

The adoption of gender quotas in Nigerian democracy embodies the institutionalization of these campaign efforts. These quotas are used at both state and party levels in forms such as reserved seats and candidate quotas for which political parties are required to nominate a given percentage of women (Suleiman, 2016). Although these policies have potential means by which women are afforded opportunities, scholarship shows that their application is influenced by party adherence and political cultures (Okoye, 2017; Olojede & Akindele, 2020). Usage at the level of candidates within states such as Lagos, Kaduna, and Plateau shows that quota benefits are accrued by those with advanced social networks in cities and educationally or relationally within states—meaning those from less affluent areas are less represented (Yusuf, 2018; Nwobi et al., 2023).

Although quotas have been formally introduced, it is contended that structural inequality affects the transformatory capacity of such policies. Tripp (2010) asserts that quotas are able to change societal norms regarding female involvement in politics but are not instrumental in

overturning structural inequality. In Nigeria, there seems to exist an interface between quotas and societal inequalities in terms of patriarchy, party politics, and economic inequality (Suleiman, 2016; Okoye, 2017). Therefore, even though there has been an uplift in female representation in government through quotas, female substantive representation through policies that are ostensibly directed at marginalized women continues to be experienced inequitably.

Early Intellectual Foundations of Women's Political Participation (Pre-1990s)

Prior to the advent of colonialism, which brought about political restructuring in Africa, women were vested with political, economic, and social authority in several societies. There is evidence that in pre-colonial Nigeria, women were actively involved in two-sex forms of governance, which provided an important space for them alongside the village leader in governance assemblies (Ingyoroko et al., 2017). For instance, among the Igbo, the "Umuada" or assemblies of the daughters played crucial roles in conflict mediation, governance of people's behavior, and direction over the allocation of resources within the society (Ingyoroko et al., 2017).

Women's political roles were not limited to advisory roles but included sovereign roles. Historical accounts suggest that women occupied the roles of monarch, regent, and military leader in different Nigerian kingdoms (Eze, 1995). In the Yoruba southwest, the roles of Iyalode (women's chief) and Iyaloja (market leader) gave the woman influence over economic, social, and political affairs (Allan, 1995). Conversely, in Northern Nigeria, the roles of queen mother and senior sister to the ruler gave the woman the position and responsibilities that gave power to those who held the position (Mack, 2022). Such roles highlight the levels to which the authority and political legitimacy that women once held became accepted and are now forgotten.

Economic power further complemented the social and political power of women in Nigerian society. Women in Nigerian society were major players in business and agricultural production. Moreover, they had control over the distribution of essential resources in their local settings (Ingyoroko et al., 2017). Through their control over resources, women possessed considerable leverage within their local settings, which ensured that their needs as well as those of their local settings were represented in politics. It has been observed that the role of women in Nigerian society provided autonomy that enabled women to take an active part in Government (Ingyoroko et al., 2017).

Such a history and presence of women in politics and the economy shaped earlier feminist thought in Africa, offering a context in which contemporary gender disparities may be understood. It is suggested that these pre-existing structures of collective governance were disrupted by colonialism and post-colonial practices, solidifying a patriarchal society that was, in earlier times, more fluid (Ingyoroko et al., 2017). To comprehend contemporary issues, such as the effectiveness of gender quotas, a knowledge of this history, which predates Western feminist thought, is essential (Mack, 2022).

Women in Politics after Independence and Military Rule (1960s-1980s)

The era of independence in Nigeria, covering the period from 1960 until the end of the 1970s, was marked by a short-lived era of democratization and ultimately decades of dictatorship by the military, which had very influential impacts on the level of engagement of women within politics. Women's visibility within formal politics existed but was minimal during the initial years of the independence era, represented by some elite members who contributed to national assemblies or local government bodies (Presley, 2025). It is reported that the entry of females

into politics was influenced by their position within society or their exposure or tie to those within politics, influenced by class and gender relationships (Uche & Udochukwu, 2024).

The military rule that began in 1966 marked a period of even more limited democratic engagement by women in government offices. This was marked by centralized decision-making organs of government that often-denied women any engagement in decision-making process (Akaje & Asonibare, 2018). Although some of them appointed women to advisory bodies or as ministers, such actions would only have been cosmetic in nature and not intended to bring about any positive results (Ezeah et al., 2018). Hence, women during this period would have remained confined to administrative or social services roles.

Despite these limitations, women's civil society activism started making an important entry during the 1970s and 1980s. Organizations and professional associations of women started agitating for more female presence in governance and change in social policies (Mbiereagu et al., 2023. Most of these groups concentrated on matters related to education, health, and social welfare, underscoring the relationship between gender roles in society and political agitation (Presley, 2025). Critics argue that this was preparatory work for later feminist movements that ensured groups of politically conscious females, enough to resist marginalization, existed during later transitions into democracy (Uche & Udochukwu, 2024).

Furthermore, post-independence and military rule cemented the role of socio-cultural hindrances to women's role-participation. Patriarchal culture, perpetuated both by tradition and the concentration of power that comes with military rule, made it difficult for women to either seek election or make policy (Ezeah et al., 2018). Moreover, the lack of formal education and material resources made it difficult for women to participate actively, especially from a rural perspective (Mbiereagu et al., 2023. This period, therefore, marks a continuation of a pattern of difficulty faced by women, wherein although there was an opening theoretically, cultural beliefs served as a hindrance to their active incorporation into Nigeria's politics.

Women and the Transition to Democracy (1990-1999)

The early 1990s until the political transition in 1999 was a pivotal period in the political participation of women in Nigeria. This was a time of increased activism as women's groups mobilized in efforts to push back against a long history of exclusion during the military regimes (Diala & Sarumi, 2025). Women's groups and civil society organizations started making conscious efforts towards pushing the agenda of democratization and making sure that women were represented in the newly formed political structures in a descriptive as well as substantive way (Oni & Joshua, 2012). This was a result of the increased realization of the importance of women's participation in politics, not just as a representation but as a way of making policies beneficial to a broader segment of the population.

During these years, internationalism began to feature significantly. Nigeria was a party to international instruments such as Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and was a participant at the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995 (Shipurut et al., 2024). These international commitments led to a kind of normative power that forced these governments to think about women's involvement in politics and contributed to domestic activism. As argued by feminist scholars Mack (2022), it was due to the simultaneous push from internationalism and domestic movements that women's involvement in politics became positioned as a matter of human rights rather than social or philanthropic welfare.

However, during the shift to democracy, some structural and socio-cultural restrictions on the growth of women participation emerged that had persisted despite increased calls for increased

participation. Women were still grossly inadequately represented in political parties, where male-held hierarchical and patronage networks generally prevailed (Pogoson, 2012)

. Lack of access to funds, in combination with generally strong patriarchal social foundations and strong male-held political networks, made it difficult for women to be able to contest for elections on an equal basis (Shipurut et al., 2024). Such limitations were found even more in the countryside, where hierarchical foundation systems and less formal education made it difficult for women's political postures.

However, the 1990s provided the background on which future institutional changes can be situated, given its contribution to the creation of gender networks, gender inequality in politics that received widespread notice, and initiatives that began to push the gender quota idea as well as affirmative action policies. It was recognized that both electoral reforms as well as building the capabilities of women to be at the forefront were critical to the movement's success (Diala & Sarumi, 2025). According to academics, this time was vital in shaping the gender-inclusive political reforms introduced post-1999, in spite of the fact that the movement had but small effects on women's political representation at the time (Shipurut et al., 2024).

Representation of Women in the Early Fourth Republic (1999-2007)

The restoration of democratic rule in 1999 ushered in a new age for women's representation in Nigerian politics. With the advent of the Fourth Republic came the hope of multi-party elections, constitutional guarantees, and an active civil society in place to press for greater representation (Okedele, 2024)). Yet, despite these constitutional guarantees, women still remained dramatically underrepresented, and deep-seated obstacles became palpable. It has been cited that, in spite of women participating in electoral contests, they remained poorly represented in parliament, with few exceptions in major cities (Foundation for Investigative Journalism-FIJ, 2025).

The early studies during this era drew attention to the problems associated with political party structures. Political parties were still dominated by males, as the nomination structures and the hierarchy in these political parties still leaned towards males (Okedele, 2024). Women were denied participation in the major decision-making bodies in political parties. Patronage was in favor of male candidates, as they had the capacity to provide economic resources for their campaigns.

Socio-economic and cultural issues continued to influence the involvement of women in politics during this era. Women who aspired to run for political positions in Nigeria may not have had the financial capital to run for political offices, while societal perceptions of their roles in society added to their burden, especially in rural Nigeria (Pogoson, 2012). Among the observations made in studies was that women tended to remain in designated "safe" seats such as local government councils or other ceremonial offices which had little impact in shaping major policy decisions (FIJ, 2025).

Despite these challenges, the early years of the Fourth Republic also witnessed the beginning of an advocacy campaign for the affirmative action or quota system. This was promoted by feminist groups, among others, to campaign for an increased presence of females in the parliament (Shipurut et al., 2024). This campaign can be seen as the first phase of the lobbying for the quota system, even though its immediate effect on the presence of females in the legislature might appear insignificant (Okedele, 2024).

Expansion of Feminist Advocacy and Institutional Reform Efforts (2007–2015)

From 2007 to 2015, women's political advocacy in Nigeria waxed stronger, with impetus from both domestic feminist organizations and international gender-equality frameworks. In this period, feminist networks such as the Women in Politics Forum and the Nigerian Women Trust Fund expanded their work in pursuit of increased visibility and influence of women in political processes. Such organizations underscored the need for institutional reforms, lobbying for party-based quotas and affirmative-action policies to address systemic underrepresentation and ensure that women at all levels of society are empowered (Orji et al., 2018). Scholars have observed that such moves marked one clear departure from localized advocacy to coordinated national campaigns targeted at both legislative and executive institutions.

The period saw gradual, piecemeal institutional reforms reflecting both domestic advocacy and Nigeria's commitments to international norms such as CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. Several states experimented with gender quotas, either through reserved seats or affirmative-action clauses in party nomination rules. But studies have shown that such measures tended to benefit women from urban, educated, and politically connected backgrounds, while grassroots and rural women remained structurally excluded. This reflected a persistent tension between formal mechanisms for inclusion and the realities of elite capture, where reform risked reproducing social hierarchies rather than substantively transforming them.

The course of reforms continued to be shaped by financial and social impediments. Running for office was an expensive endeavor and, therefore, women without patronage networks or private wealth were mostly unable to compete effectively in the electoral sphere (Pogoson, 2012). Besides, cultural attitudes about women's public roles persisted in many quarters, often undermining the perceived legitimacy of female candidates among either voters or party selectors. According to scholars, the forces of advocacy and policy reforms created opportunities, but they did little to change the gendered power dynamics within political parties or the wider society.

Despite these limitations, the period of 2007–2015 represented a very important crystallization of feminist political strategies in Nigeria. Women's organizations increasingly combined advocacy with research, monitoring, and capacity-building programs to support female candidates. These strategies stressed both an increase in the number of women holding office and substantive representation of the interests of hitherto marginalized constituencies. Scholars suggest that this period marked the intellectual and organizational foundations for quota implementations in the post-2015 period and wider debates on elite capture, representation, and the intersection of gender, class, and power in Nigerian politics.

Quotas, Inclusion and Elite Capture Contested: Contemporary Debates (2015–2025)

From 2015 to the present, debates on women's political participation in Nigeria have increasingly focused on the interplay between gender quotas, party structures, and elite capture. Several studies document how formal quota systems and affirmative-action measures, while intended to enhance women's representation, have often been appropriated by politically connected and economically privileged women (Suleiman, 2016; Yusuf, 2018). This elite concentration suggests that reforms, though well-intentioned, frequently reproduce existing hierarchies, allowing a narrow subset of women to access elective and appointive positions while leaving grassroots and rural women marginalized. Scholars have signaled that elite capture has emerged as a central challenge in translating gender quotas into substantive, broadly inclusive representation (Uwa et al., 2018).

Other research explores the gatekeeping role of political parties in deciding which women benefit from quotas. The parties remain largely masculinized and patronage-based, with candidate nomination decisions still based on financial resources, family networks, and political connections. This has resulted in quota provisions reinforcing the dominance of already privileged women, rather than acting as mechanisms for broadening participation. Several studies have underscored that understanding the social profile of women benefiting from quotas is crucial to assessing the effectiveness of gender reforms in producing equitable representation.

Another crucial dimension in contemporary debates involves the substantive outcomes of women's political representation. While descriptive representation, or simply having more women in office, has improved incrementally, evidence suggests that elite women's policy priorities often do not reflect those of grassroots constituencies (Uwa et al., 2018). In light of this disconnect, quota systems raise questions about whether quota systems achieve their broader goals of enhancing women's social and economic welfare or whether such systems serve symbolic or political legitimacy purposes. Indeed, scholars argue that quota reforms, without mechanisms of monitoring, accountability, and meaningful civil society participation, run the risk of ensuring a tokenistic form of representation rather than one that brings about transformative change (Okoye, 2017).

The need to embed intersectional perspectives in the analysis of gender reforms is stressed by contemporary scholarship. Not only gender, but also class, geography, education, and ethnicity influence women's experiences in politics. Rural women, less educated women, and poorer women are still deprivileged vis-à-vis these cultural and structural obstacles to political participation, even with the implementation of quotas. Recognition of the element of intersectionality has thus moderated more recent approaches to advocacy, focusing on how such reforms that are inclusive should address multiple axes of marginalization if gender equity in politics is not to remain an elite issue.

Percentage of Women in Nigerian Elective Offices (2018-2025)

The table below details the approximate percentage of women in the National Assembly (Senate and House of Representatives combined) and the overall national average for all elective offices for specific years within the requested timeframe.

Time Period	Office	Percentage of Women
2018	National Average (all elective offices)	~5.6%
2019 (9th Assembly)	National Assembly (Senate & Reps)	~4.5% (21 total seats)
2023 (10th Assembly)	National Assembly (Senate & Reps)	~4.2% (20 total seats)
2023	National Average (all elective offices)	~4.43% (68 total officials)
2024-2025	National Assembly (Current)	~4.2% (4 Senators, 16 Reps)
2024-2025	State Houses of Assembly (Current)	<5% (approx. 49 of 988 seats)

Source: *Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (2023)*

The 2023 general elections again, delivered low numbers for women in the National Assembly. The representation of women in the incoming Assembly is not a significant improvement from the outgoing 9th Assembly. The 10th Assembly will have women occupying 3 out of 109 seats (2.7%) in the Senate and 17 out of 360 seats in the House of Representatives (4.7%), which represents 4.2% of the 469-member Assembly. In the

9th National Assembly, there were 8 female Senators (7.3%) and 13 female Members of the House of Representatives (3.6%), which represents 4.5% of the entire Assembly. After seven general election cycles since 1999, the number of women in the Senate has dropped to what it was at Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999.

With current figures for the 10th National Assembly, Nigeria remains at the bottom of the list in the ranking for the number of women in African Parliaments. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPC), which usually provides this information is yet to update its data on Nigeria due to the recent general elections. However, as of April 2023, the lowest ranking countries have 8.62% of women in unicameral or lower chambers of Parliament and 6.67% in upper chambers of Parlaiment, respectively. The cumulative percentage of women in the two chambers of Nigeria's incoming 10th National Assembly is below 5%. It is also important to note that no woman was elected in 15 out of Nigeria's 36 State Houses of Assembly following the State level general elections in March 2023 (Orji, 2023).

Gaps in the existing literature

Notwithstanding the growing body of scholarship on women's political participation and gender reforms in Nigeria, a number of critical gaps remain. First, while many studies document descriptive representation-i.e., the presence of women in elective and appointive offices-there is limited empirical work examining the social profile of women who benefit from quotas (Suleiman, 2016). Most research emphasizes aggregate numbers without disaggregating by education, class, geography, or political connections, which creates ambiguity about whether reforms actually promote inclusion across social strata or primarily benefit elite women. This omission is important for understanding how policies affect rural, low-income, and poorly educated women, who make up a majority of Nigeria's female population.

The scholarly deficit on the intersection between feminist advocacy organizations and party-controlled nomination processes, as such, persists. While advocacy groups were key drivers of gender reforms, little is known about how much clout they retain when quotas become embedded within party hierarchies (Olojede & Akindele, 2020). Few research works make systematic inquiries about whether these organizations can effectively monitor implementation, challenge elite capture, or ensure grassroots concerns inform policy agendas. This neglects a crucial dimension of gender reform, especially that which mechanisms could bridge the gap between formal reforms and substantive inclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on three closely related theoretical approaches: Gender Quota Theory, Elite Capture, and Intersectional Feminist Theory. Although each of these theories is, on its own, relevant, and can independently make a case for positive action in support of women, utilising them together is considered more apt and as such, these theories taken together offer a framework for understanding both the potential and limitations of gender reform policies in the Nigerian state.

Gender quota theory, as argued by scholars such as Dahlerup (2006) and Tripp (2010), emphasizes the application of Institutional mechanisms in improving women's participation in political bodies. The theory explains that quotas function as correctional mechanisms in redressing systemic asymmetries and securing that women achieve both descriptive and substantive representation. The latter describes the numeric representation and power to shape policies that regulate and determine women's lives. According to Dahlerup (2006), there are three forms or types of quotas: reserved seats quotas, candidate quotas for legislation, and voluntary party quotas that determine participation rates within political parties and are reflective of each party's commitment to inclusivity and addressing gender inequality within their structures and spaces. In general, “The quota system provides a guarantee for a minimum number of women in legislative institutions; candidate quotas require parties to include a specified percentage of women candidates; and voluntary party quotas are expressions of parties' commitment to gender inclusivity.” Moreover, according to the framework above, gender quotas do not function as mere symbolism but are significant in modifying political spaces and providing institutional opportunities for women to take part in decision-making processes and structures within societies.

One of the core points of the gender quota theory is the emphasis on the pivotal nature of institution design and associated mechanisms. The implementation and effectiveness of the quota system rely on the mechanism through which the quotas are designed and implemented in the political institution. Tripp (2010) states that lack of effective design and/or the absence of strong implementation mechanisms may result in the quotas remaining ineffective or mere tokens. The gender quota theory highlights the fact that the quota system is an important signal in the society about its willingness to promote and support gender equality in politics. The quota system is both an instrument for transforming institutions as well as an agent for bringing this transformation in the social context by breaking the traditional bias in the politics.

However, aside from institutional establishment, another concept that quota theory on gender applies when regarding the implications of having more women on a greater scale is related to how power is allocated inside an institution or organization as a result of quotas being applied. This concept discusses how making room for more women inside an institution can function as a catalyst that leads towards a more inclusive system of governance, not only from a legislative standpoint but also from a social construct related to how equality is valued regarding gender. According to Dahlerup (2006), it is important to relate that ultimately, achieving equality is not only a result of numbers but is also a function of how an institution can become an environment where having more women produce a contribution towards a shift inside policy formulation towards equality.

Another theoretical lens that might apply to this context would be the theory of Elite capture, which was formulated by O'Brien and Rickne (2016). According to this theory, elites that are present in the social, economic, and political structures might capture reforms like gender quotas and use them for their own advantage. According to the theory, even institutional structures that are created to institutionalize inclusiveness might end up in the hands of the already-advantaged, and this might lead to the marginalization of other groups who are left out despite the institutionalization that might help to create an equal playing field. According to the theory, the existence of quotas and other reforms does not necessarily lead to inclusiveness and equal outcomes, as inequalities that are structurally created act as barriers that prevent the under-advantaged from taking advantage of reforms.

The other critical element in elite capture would be the way in which institutional and organizational gatekeepers mediate this process. Party hierarchies, structures, and patronage can define just how this process of reform is carried out in an effective manner. The theory of elite capture would emphasize that it is possible to have formalized procedures that are in effect negated by informal relations, in order to create an environment in which individuals who are personally and politically connected are able to maintain their power within society. This particular theory would thus identify that policy can only be effective, and not create an environment opposing that which it seeks to create – namely equality.

On the other hand, the theory of elite capture can also be applied to the effect of elite capture on the priorities and outcomes of institutional change. Even if increased representation has been achieved through reform, the structural bias in favour of the privileged may prevail. This implies that elites can capture reform and that it may, in the end, reinforce exclusion on a larger scale, as the control over decision-making continues to be in the hands of those who are adept at dealing with the political and social hierarchy. This underlines the fact that there might be limitations in the strategies of formal inclusion, which might undermine the transformative character of policy interventions.

The intersectional feminist theory, conceptualized by Crenshaw in 1991 and further explained in the publication by Yuval-Davis in 2006, is an approach used for understanding how gender is intersected by other sources of inequality, like geography, education, and ethnic and class discrimination. According to this theory, women's experiences cannot be homogenized and generalized. Instead, they require the same experiences also being considered in a policy designed for women. Another way to explain this is how some interventions, like quotas, can help some women while excluding others, and intersectional feminist theory is important for this particular reason.

An important point that intersectional theories make is that it is not possible to provide a gender-based solution for inequalities that are structural. It is quite possible that broad approaches designed for women as a whole could create more inequalities for various groups if these approaches ignore the intersecting inequalities. The intersectional approach underlines the point that it is important to look at more than one characteristic if a particular approach needs to provide equal benefits. The intersectional approach, therefore, indicates the significance of specialized strategies such as capacity development for marginalized women for more equal access to politics.

Another important area covered by intersectional feminism is the need for the analysis of both descriptive and substantive representation from a multidimensional perspective. This feminist ideology strongly suggests that although the representation or presence of women might increase, this alone does not inevitably ensure their impact or effects, specially in the case of women living at the intersection of multiple oppressed groups. This ideology plays an important role in assessing the diverse impacts of various political change efforts, thereby making sure that these efforts create more opportunities for those groups that have an advantage as well as do not neglect other groups.

The contribution of this dissertation arises from its ability to apply gender quota theory in conjunction with elite capture theory and intersectionality theory to provide a comprehensive contextual perspective on gender reform in Nigeria. While the theory of quotas brings a practical pathway to inclusiveness, elite capture theory helps to explain inequalities in benefit distribution, and intersectionality theory helps to expose divergent effects on women above other groups of societal inequalities. This makes it a comprehensive tool to interpret an intervention tool like gender quotas in relation to power and inequality in Nigeria.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach to assess the implementation and consequences of gender quotas concerning women's political engagement in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. There were six selected States that covered the six geopolitical zones in the country. These are Lagos State, in the South-West; Rivers State in the South-South; Enugu State, from the South-East; Kaduna State for North-West; Abuja, situated in the North-Central and Borno State in the North-East. The two prominent political parties featured within the study were All Progressives Congress-APC and Peoples Democratic Party-PDP, based solely on the fact that they are the two major political parties in terms electoral victories and representations during the years of study.

The quantitative data was obtained from an original dataset of candidate level data of 60 female candidates, representing 10 candidates in each state, who ran for primary or general elections under the quota system. The data was gathered from party nomination lists, Independent National Electoral Commission documents, candidate profile information, and press coverage, including socio-demographic information, party affiliation, election results, and family or patronage linkages. Purposive sampling techniques ensured there was a representative pool of candidates from different political parties and states, representing a wide array of socio-economic strata. Logistic regression analysis was applied to inspect nomination outcomes and party hierarchies and elite linkages.

The qualitative design was conducted using 45 semi-structured interviews with female candidates, grassroots candidates, and party officials, and feminist organization leaders, purposively and snowballing sampled to ensure the incorporation of elite and non-elite voices. Supplemental materials included feminist advocacy materials, policy texts, and media accounts tracing the evolving priorities of gender advocates and responses from institutions regarding gender reforms. The quantitative findings were analyzed comparatively across states, and the qualitative findings were analyzed thematically examining the experience of quota, procedural, and representational aspects, and combining the two methodologies provided a strong basis for triangulation, and offering a nuanced qualitative assessment of the outcomes of gender quota reforms.

Data Analysis and Findings

The study made use of a mixed-methods analysis to investigate the implication and implementation of gender quotas within the six states in Nigeria that were surveyed, namely Lagos, Rivers, Enugu, Kano, Kaduna, and Borno States, which were chosen to capture regional diversity, variations in party dominance, and levels of electoral competitiveness.

Objective 1: Identify the Social Profile of Women who Obtain Nominations through the use of Quota Arrangements

Sixty female candidates were quantitatively analyzed, and the results indicated that 68 percent originated from an urban setting, and 32 percent were from a rural setting. Furthermore, 74 percent had tertiary-level education, and 61 percent had developed either family or patronage ties in the political arena. The results obtained using the logistical regression model indicated that the independent variables of the study were significantly linked to the dependent variable. These variables include the location (urban setting), $\beta=1.52$, $p < .05$; tertiary education, $\beta=1.78$, $p < .05$; and patronage connection, $\beta=2.03$, $p < .01$. The results were validated by the interviews carried out, and the respondents indicated the vital roles played by education, location, and family in the nomination process for positioning in the political contest. A female candidate in Lagos said, for example, *without the influence of my uncle and the support of the location where I reside, there is no gainsay to the fact that I wouldn't be considered for the quota seat*.

Objective 2: Examine whether feminist groups still exercise influence upon selection procedures

Quantitively, there were no statistically significant advantages for candidates associated with feminist groups after the inclusion of quotas into party politics ($\chi^2 = 2.14$, $p > 0.05$). In-depth interviews among 12 feminist supporters showed that the presence of the groups helped in pushing for the adoption of the quota system, but their role became irrelevant when nominations were made. This was evident from the comment by a respondent in Kaduna: "We could influence the adoption of the quota system, but when the political parties took control, our influences meant nothing." Analysis of documentary evidence from the NGO reports showed that the level of NGO observation was limited to advocacy, yet it was not an aspect of selection.

Objective 3: Examining Whether Non-Elite Women Suffer Backlash

Nomination success rates were lower for rural and less-educated nominees (28%) than for urban and educated nominees (72%), based on survey results. Interviews carried out on 15 grassroots nominees also highlighted financial difficulties, nomination exclusion, and intimidation within party gatekeepers. According to an Enugu nominee, "The seat was reserved for someone connected; it was risky even contesting." Comparisons across different states showed that nominees from rural areas in the states of Borno and Enugu reported the worst nomination challenges.

Objective 4: Examine the influence of elite dominance on substantive representation

Quantitative data showed that elite nominees occupied 78% of the quota seats in all six states. Logistic regression analysis also showed that nominees with connections to cities as well as to political parties had 2.03 times higher probability of getting nominated ($p < 0.01$). Interview analysis showed that elite overrepresentation reduced focus of grassroots agendas: "Infrastructure in villages, social services, and laws for protection against violence against women have little importance in legislation. As captured by a respondent from River State…*Quota seats are occupied, legislation has little importance for women in villages.*

On their own, these results show that gender quotas increase descriptive representation while reproducing elite dominance and obstructing non-elite women and substantive policy outcomes. Both social and structural elements were shown to influence quota effects in these combined results.

Table 1: Distribution of Candidate Characteristics and Nomination Success

Candidate Characteristic	Number (n=60)	% of Total	Nomination Success Rate (%)
Urban residence	41	68%	58%
Rural residence	19	32%	19%
Tertiary education	44	74%	60%
Secondary education or below	14	26%	12%
Strong family/patronage ties	37	61%	65%
Weak/no political connections	23	39%	18%

Discussion of Findings

Based on a mixed-methods study of female quota nominees, this research found that quota arrangements predominantly benefited urban, educated, and politically connected women; that feminist groups were marginalized in post-adoption selection processes; those non-elite women faced significant exclusion and backlash; and that resulting elite overrepresentation impeded the translation of descriptive gains into substantive policy for marginalized groups.

The analysis of 60 female candidates revealed a strong concentration of nominations among urban, highly educated, and politically connected women. Quantitative data showed that 68% of nominees were urban-based, 74% had tertiary education, and 61% had family or patronage links that facilitated their access to party nominations. Logistic regression confirmed that urban residence ($\beta = 1.52$, $p < 0.05$), education ($\beta = 1.78$, $p < 0.05$), and party connections ($\beta = 2.03$, $p < 0.01$) were significant predictors of success under quota provisions. Qualitative interviews illustrated how urban networks and elite social capital provided tangible advantages, such as access to party leaders and insider information about nomination processes. Rural candidates reported exclusion from key party meetings and limited exposure to decision-makers, reinforcing the statistical patterns observed in the survey. These findings highlight that while quotas are intended to broaden access, in practice they disproportionately benefit women already advantaged by education, location, and political connections. The result underscores the interplay between formal mechanisms and entrenched socio-political hierarchies in shaping opportunities for women. These findings confirm elite capture theory and the intersectional feminist perspective, showing that while quotas broaden descriptive representation, pre-existing socio-economic advantages determine who benefits.

Quantitative analysis indicated that candidates with ties to feminist organisations did not have significantly higher nomination success once quotas were absorbed into party structures ($\chi^2 = 2.14$, $p > 0.05$). This suggests that the formal mechanisms of quota implementation are dominated by party hierarchies, which limit external influence. Qualitative interviews revealed that feminist groups were effective during the advocacy phase, lobbying for quota adoption and publicizing gender inclusion goals. However, once nominations were managed by party gatekeepers, advocates' input carried little weight in final selections. Several respondents emphasized that the shift from advocacy to party-controlled nomination undermined accountability and reduced transparency in candidate selection. These findings indicate that while feminist organisations are critical in creating quotas, their influence over implementation and actual nominations is limited by elite capture within political parties.This confirms elite capture theory, showing that party hierarchies mediate access even after reforms, while also partially supporting intersectional feminism in highlighting structural barriers to non-elite women.

Survey data showed that rural and less-educated candidates had lower nomination success rates (28%) compared to urban, elite candidates (72%). Qualitative interviews with grassroots aspirants highlighted financial constraints, intimidation, and procedural exclusion as key barriers preventing non-elite women from accessing quota seats. Participants described being actively discouraged or sidelined by party officials who prioritized candidates with established networks or wealth. Regional analysis revealed that candidates in Borno and Enugu faced particularly acute challenges, reflecting local political dynamics and social norms. Respondents noted that attempts to contest often involved social pressure, reputational risks, and, in some cases, overt threats. These findings demonstrate that quotas do not automatically protect non-

elite women from structural exclusion or backlash, and in some cases, the system reinforces existing inequalities. The result further confirms intersectional feminism and elite capture theory, illustrating that structural inequalities and elite dominance continue to mediate who benefits from quotas.
Quantitative data indicated that elite nominees controlled 78% of quota positions across the six states, with urban and politically connected candidates being 2.03 times more likely to win nominations ($p < 0.01$). Qualitative interviews revealed that this concentration of elite women limited the translation of descriptive representation into substantive policy gains. Respondents reported that rural infrastructure, social welfare programs, and protections against gender-based violence were often neglected, as elite nominees focused on urban or constituency-specific interests. Feminist advocates noted that the gap between representation and policy outcomes reduced the broader impact of quotas on marginalized communities. The findings suggest that while quotas succeed in increasing the numerical presence of women, they do not automatically ensure inclusive or grassroots-focused policy attention. Overall, elite dominance within parties and social networks continues to shape not only who gains access to political office but also whose interests are prioritized once in power. The finding confirms elite capture theory and partially supports intersectional feminism, while highlighting the limits of gender quota theory in ensuring substantive representation beyond numerical inclusion.

Nigeria's formal commitment to gender representativeness through an affirmative quota system remains limited and ineffective. At the federal level, there is no legally binding national quota law, resulting in reliance on voluntary party measures and normative endorsements that have failed to produce meaningful change. This is starkly evidenced by the persistently low and declining representation of women in the National Assembly, which hovered around 4.2-4.5% between 2019 and 2025. The enforcement mechanism for any gender inclusivity goals is weak, as control over candidate nomination is ceded to political parties—structures the research identifies as dominated by gatekeeping and patronage, which systematically exclude non-elite women.

Adoption at the state level has been patchy and largely symbolic. While some states, such as Lagos, Kaduna, and Plateau, have experimented with quota policies, the enforcement and genuine support from state assemblies are critically deficient. The national average for women in all elective offices remains abysmally low, at approximately 4.43% in 2023, and representation in State Houses of Assembly is currently below 5%. This data confirms that without mandatory, structural reforms and proactive enforcement mechanisms that bypass party gatekeepers, quota policies; where they exist, are easily co-opted. The result is a system that perpetuates elite capture, as illustrated by the research findings, rather than fostering the broad-based, substantive representation it ostensibly promises.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates that, albeit the symbolic importance of the gender quota reform packages introduced in the Nigerian political system, the political context in which this reform packages exist seems to prioritize elite women over grassroots supporters. This paper concludes that the most highly educated, urban, and networked women are the chief beneficiaries of the gender quota reform packages, leaving other, less-advantaged women in rural areas to feel largely disconnected from the political possibilities that exist. While feminist advocacy groups play a pivotal role in pushing for the passage of these gender reform packages, their effectiveness wanes when the selection of candidates for political appointment becomes an issue determined by party politics. In this way, the increased representation of women among the political

descriptive representation does not necessarily confer more substantive representation for marginalized groups.

The research findings have a number of implications. Firstly, open nomination processes are important for avoiding elite capture and ensuring that quota guarantees serve a wide range of female actors. Secondly, formal monitoring bodies, which include feminist groups, can play a role in ensuring the implementation process is tracked. Thirdly, interventions such as capacity development, funding, and mentorship for rural and low-income women are important for overcoming structural constraints, which limit their grassroots engagement. Lastly, it appears essential to link gender reforms with their outcomes, such that women who win seats under quota guarantees make efforts to ensure that rural infrastructure, welfare, and gender violence are covered in their policy agendas. Structurally changing the system, combined with monitoring and empowering, would help Nigeria achieve descriptive and substantive gender justice.

Recommendations

i. Enhance nomination transparency through the development of universal criteria for candidate nominations in the area of quotas.

ii. The establishment of overseeing roles for feminist advocacy bodies and civil society organizations to track the implementation of the quota system, nominations, election results, and the legislative agendas of elected female representatives.

iii. Increase targeted capacity-building engagements among rural and poor women through mentorship, management of campaigns, political networking, as well as financial networking.

iv. Tie the quotas to concrete policy outcomes, with the goal of having the elected females promote the cause of the marginal groups. Encourage intersectional frameworks for quota design and political reform that address how gender combines with social class, geographical location, ethnicity, and education to empower all women, not merely those in cities.

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APPENDIX A: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Research Project Title: The Paradox of Gender Reform in Nigeria: Feminist Advocacy, Elite Gains and Grassroots Exclusion.

Researchers: Timothy Sunday JOSHUA-WUO & Menyenabasi Franklin CHUKS-UNIBEN

Date of Guide Development: July to August, 2025

Interview Type: Semi-structured In-depth Interview

PART 1: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND INTRODUCTION SCRIPT

Good [morning/afternoon]. Thank you once again for agreeing to participate in this interview for our research on 'The Paradox of Gender Reform in Nigeria: Feminist Advocacy, Elite Gains and Grassroots Exclusion'. Our conversation will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate representation of your views. All recordings will be stored securely, transcribed anonymously, and used solely for this research.

PART 2: CORE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Section A: Background and Contextual Positioning

1. Could you begin by telling me about your involvement in gender-related advocacy or work in Nigeria?
2. How would you describe your current role or position within the gender advocacy landscape?
3. What personal or professional journey led you to this work?
4. How would you characterize the organization or network you work with in terms of its reach and primary constituency?

Section B: Perceptions of Gender Reform Landscape

5. From your perspective, what have been the most significant achievements of gender reform advocacy in Nigeria in the past decade?
6. How would you describe the relationship between different actors in the gender advocacy space (e.g., elite NGOs, grassroots organizations, international donors, government agencies)?
7. In your experience, who typically sets the agenda for gender reform in Nigeria, and how does this process work?

Section C: Experiences with Inclusion and Exclusion

8. Can you describe a specific policy or advocacy campaign where you observed clear differences in participation between elite advocates and grassroots communities?
9. What barriers do grassroots women or community-based organizations face in influencing gender policy in Nigeria?
10. What advantages do elite or urban-based feminist organizations have in accessing decision-making spaces?
11. Could you share an experience where you felt grassroots perspectives were effectively incorporated into national gender advocacy? What made it work?
12. Conversely, could you describe a situation where grassroots voices were marginalized or excluded? What were the dynamics at play?

Section D: Structural Analysis and Power Dynamics

13. How do funding mechanisms and donor priorities shape who gets to speak for 'Nigerian women'?
14. What role do education, class, and language play in determining who participates in gender reform discussions?
15. How do traditional and religious institutions interact with both elite and grassroots gender advocacy?
16. In your view, to what extent do current gender reforms address the most pressing concerns of poor, rural, or marginalized women in Nigeria?

Section E: Personal Reflections and Change Pathways

17. Have your own views on feminist advocacy in Nigeria changed over time? If so, how?
18. What tensions, if any, do you navigate between professional advocacy work and grassroots accountability?
19. What would a more inclusive gender reform process look like in practice?
20. What concrete steps could be taken to bridge the gap between elite advocacy and grassroots needs?

Section F: Closing and Additional Insights

21. Is there anything important about this topic that we haven't discussed?

22. Are there specific documents, reports, or other individuals you would recommend we consult?
23. Do you have any questions for me about the research or how your information will be used?

Closing Script:

That concludes my formal questions. I sincerely thank you for your time, candor, and valuable insights. Your perspective is crucial to helping us understand the complex dynamics of gender advocacy in Nigeria.

Thank you again for contributing to this important research.