**Role of major and minor parties in female candidacy selection in Nigeria: A study of women’s participation in the 2019 and 2023 general elections**

**Abstract**

Despite numerous legal and policy frameworks designed to enhance gender inclusion, women's political participation in Nigeria remains notably limited. This comparative research explores how major and minor political parties influenced women's participation in electoral contests during the 2019 and 2023 general elections. The study adopted a qualitative content analysis approach**, and** data were analyzed using the simple percentage descriptive statistical method.Datasets and reports from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and relevant international organizations were extracted and used in the study. To achieve the aim of the study, political parties were categorized into two groups: major parties (All Progressives Congress [APC] and Peoples’ Democratic Party [PDP]) and minor parties (All other parties). Other secondary sources employed in the study include journal articles, newspapers, and books, while the Feminist Institutionalism (FI) theory served as the study’s theoretical framework. Research indicates that while major political parties offered few opportunities to female candidates, minor political parties were more accommodating. Further findings reveal that despite a general decrease in the number of female candidates presented by both major and minor parties in the 2023 election compared to 2019, electoral outcomes did not improve. The study suggests adopting a more inclusive process for party nominations, providing more institutional support to female candidates, implementing legal reforms to enforce gender quotas within political parties, and allocating reserved seats for women, among others. Enhancing women's inclusion in major political parties is crucial for increasing their participation and representation in governance.

**Keywords:** Female candidacy, major and minor political parties, women's representation, policy reform, Nigeria’s 2019 and 2023 elections

**Introduction**

Globally, women's involvement and representation in politics and decision-making have advanced, though disparities persist, especially in Africa. Although certain nations have advanced considerably with the help of gender quotas and affirmative action measures, women still encounter entrenched challenges like cultural expectations, financial limitations, and political exclusion. According to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2025), the global representation of women stands at 27.3%. This data reveals the low representation of women in leadership roles and decision-making entities (Amoah, 2024; Vincent-Orugbo, 2022). In Africa, nations such as Rwanda and Senegal have demonstrated leadership with significant female representation in parliament. However, many countries, especially in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, continue to face numerous challenges in enhancing women’s representation in leadership posts.

In Nigeria, although numerous legal and institutional measures exist to foster gender equality in politics, Nigerian women still encounter substantial obstacles in electoral competitions. Numerous historical events have occurred following Women’s struggle for their rights and representation in governance. A notable event in this direction was the Aba Women’s Riot in 1929, in which large numbers of Igbo women marched against the marginalization of their rights and fought against colonial taxation (Afolabi, 2022; Korieh & Onogwu, 2024). This remarkable achievement marked a turning point in women's political history. After Independence in 1960, there was an increase in women’s political engagement, with women like Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti advocating women’s voting rights and improved participation in politics. However, the patriarchal structure of Nigerian society has continued to be an obstacle to women’s advancement in politics despite minimal achievements.

However, towards the 20th and early 21st centuries, the fight for gender involvement in politics increased with the aid of advocacy and policy reforms. Organizations such as the Women in Nigeria (WIN) movements, which were formed in the 1980s, advocated for the socio-political empowerment and policy reforms to enhance women's involvement in politics (Madunagu, 2008). Beginning in 1999, which ushered in the Fourth Republic and civilian rule after a long military administration, women's involvement in the legislative and executive posts improved, although still minimal. The Gender policy framework, which came into play in 2006, and numerous efforts to push for gender bills in Nigeria’s legislature are some efforts geared towards enhancing women’s participation in governance (Uche & Udochukwu, 2024). Despite these efforts, cultural and institutional barriers continue to hamper women’s representation in governance and leadership.

Since political parties serve as the gatekeepers of political representation, they hold significant influence in determining the opportunities available to female candidates (Herawaty, 2024). Throughout history, Nigerian women have faced significant socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers in their efforts to establish a presence in the nation’s political sphere. Although democratic transitions have widened avenues for political participation, structural obstacles still hinder women's ability to secure party nominations, access financial resources, and achieve electoral success (Brechenmacher & Hubbard, 2020; Nkereuwem, 2023). The influence of political parties in promoting or obstructing female candidacy is a key element in the wider discourse on gender and electoral politics.

Leading political parties like the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) dominate Nigeria's political landscape, wielding significant financial and structural influence. Nonetheless, these parties have frequently faced criticism for their lack of inclusiveness, as women often find it challenging to obtain nominations for key competitive positions. High nomination fees, patriarchal prejudices, and internal party dynamics have led to the exclusion of female candidates, driving many to pursue alternative platforms (Adamu, 2023; Aderayo et al., 2023; Ugwu & Okoye, 2022).

Conversely, minor political parties have surfaced as promising platforms for advancing women's political aspirations. Historically, parties like the Allied People’s Movement (APM) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) have shown greater willingness to nominate female candidates, frequently for high-profile roles such as the presidency or governorship. Minor parties often encounter substantial obstacles, such as insufficient funding, restricted voter outreach, and diminished prospects of winning elections (Hoodfar & Tajali, 2011), which makes them less effective avenues for women striving for substantial political representation.

Analyzing the 2019 and 2023 elections highlights both advancements and ongoing obstacles in women's participation in the electoral process. In these election periods, female candidates faced ongoing challenges in competing effectively due to electoral violence, vote-buying, and a political culture that perpetuates male dominance (Ugwu, 2024). Nevertheless, the role of political parties in fostering women's participation continues to be crucial for their active engagement in politics and governance. In addition, electoral reforms and advocacy initiatives beyond party frameworks have contributed to shaping the political landscape for women. The Not Too Young to Run Act and advocacy for gender quota laws have motivated more women to participate in elections. However, these policies are yet to yield significant benefits, as political parties have not effectively established affirmative action measures to guarantee increased female involvement (Chukwudi, 2024; Uzor, 2019).

This research, therefore, examines how internal politics within major and minor political parties impacted women's participation in electoral contests during Nigeria's 2019 and 2023 general elections. The focus is to conduct a comparative analysis of party nominations, candidate support systems, and electoral results in the 2019 and 2023 elections. It further aims to assess whether there has been an increase in female candidacy representation from both major and minor parties, as well as the level of women’s successes in electoral contests during these election years. To fulfill these objectives, political parties were categorized into two groups: major parties (APC and PDP) and minor parties (all others). The justification for this grouping stemmed from the dominance, longevity, and impact of these parties in Nigeria’s political landscape.

Previous studies such as (Adefemi, 2024; Akpoghome & Awhefeada, 2023; Dan-Azumi & Asan, 2021; Okonkwo, 2025) focused on women’s political participation, electoral victories, and challenges to their successes but not on parties’ selection patterns and women’s victories along party lines. Thus, there is a dearth of comparative studies on the influence of major and minor parties on women’s participation concerning their selection and electoral outcomes along party lines within the two specified election periods. This research, therefore, serves as a follow-up on our previous study Ugwu and Okoye (2022)- which examined political party candidacy selection, focusing majorly on the 2019 elections across different levels, parties, and states. Therefore, analyzing the patterns in candidates’ selection by political parties (both major and minor) and the outcome of the elections is crucial for understanding how both major and minor parties impact women's participation and successes in electoral contests. This will add to the existing data and literature in the research area and serve as a guide for developing and implementing policy strategies to promote women's participation and representation in politics.

**Theoretical Framework**

This research is based on the Feminist Institutionalism (FI) theory, which explores how both formal and informal political institutions influence gender outcomes in governance and representation. Key contributors to Feminist Institutionalism, such as Jane Mansbridge, Anne L. Einwohner, Kathleen Thelen, and Judith A. Nagel, have played a pivotal role in advancing this theory by examining how gendered power relations are entrenched in political institutions and exploring ways these institutions can be transformed to foster gender equality. Feminist Institutionalism asserts that political frameworks, party systems, and electoral mechanisms are heavily influenced by patriarchal norms, which can either enable or hinder women's involvement in politics (Kenny, 2014; Mackay et al., 2010; Mackay & Murtagh, 2019). This theory highlights how institutional barriers and opportunities contribute to the challenges women face in obtaining party nominations, securing campaign financing, and achieving electoral success in Nigeria's political system.

In this study’s context, Feminist Institutionalism proves significant, especially as it emphasizes the role of major and minor political parties as crucial institutional gatekeepers that either advance or obstruct women's electoral opportunities. Prominent parties like the APC and the PDP have established institutional systems that frequently hinder female candidates, involving high nomination fees, informal male-centric networks, and the absence of internal gender quotas. Institutional obstacles restrict women's opportunities to run for and win elections, even though legal provisions for gender equality exist.

On the other hand, smaller parties like the APM, SDP, and the Action Democratic Party (ADP) tend to create more opportunities for women by granting them party tickets for key competitive positions. Feminist Institutionalism also sheds light on why these smaller parties face challenges in converting their inclusivity into electoral success. Female candidates representing smaller parties encounter significant obstacles in winning elections because of inadequate institutional frameworks, insufficient funding, and minimal grassroots backing. This supports the notion that electoral outcomes for women are shaped more by institutional design than by individual ambition (Williamson, 2017).

Additionally, informal institutional practices in Nigerian politics, such as patronage networks, electoral violence, and vote-buying, further hinder the prospects of female candidates. Although political parties may officially support women's involvement, informal systems still uphold male dominance. Feminist Institutionalism provides insight into how informal norms and power structures generate extra challenges for women, hindering their ability to navigate and succeed within the established political framework.

This study analyzes the influence of political parties as institutional actors on women's electoral participation in the 2019 and 2023 elections through the lens of Feminist Institutionalism. This research is significant as it examines the trends in women's participation in electoral competition, analyzing candidates’ selection processes and women’s election victories within the specified election years. Understanding this trend would aid in proffering policy strategies to enhance women’s political representation in future elections for effective governance.

**Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative content analysis method. This research method was employed to identify and analyze documented data to understand patterns and trends in women’s participation in Nigeria. The study extracted data content from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) on the elections held in 2019 and 2023 and from the IPU dataset of (2025) to analyze female candidacy selection and representation of women in governance in Nigeria using descriptive statistical analysis. The simple percentage analysis was adopted to compare the two election cycles to understand the percentage representation, differences, or improvement in both candidacy selection and seats won by women at the national, state, and regional levels.

To accomplish this objective, political parties were categorized into major (APC and PDP) and minor parties (All other parties). This classification was guided by these parties' dominance, strength, and influence in Nigeria’s political landscape. Data were displayed using tabular presentations, while key trends were analyzed using descriptive statistics like percentages and differences in women's representation (candidates and seats won) in the national and state elections within the scope of the study. Journal articles, newspaper publications, and textbooks were additional sources of data used in the study.

**Result and Discussion:**

**Global and regional representation of women in Parliament**

The level of women's representation in parliaments differs greatly between regions, with some nations attaining gender equality while others fall behind. Recent data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) reveals that the global average on women's representation stands at 27.3%. Worldwide, Rwanda ranks first, with women holding 63.8% of the seats in the lower chamber of its parliament, followed by Cuba at 55.7% and Nicaragua at 55%. Other countries next in the ranking include Andorra, Mexico, and the United Arab Emirates, with 50% each (IPU, 2025). These countries have significant female representation driven by robust gender equality policies. Conversely, the Middle East and certain Asian and African countries continue to have low levels of participation, with some having less than 10% of women in legislative bodies.

Although certain African nations have made notable strides, overall representation is still below the global norm. African ranking shows that Rwanda takes the lead, followed by South Africa (44%), Senegal (41.2%), and Namibia (40.6%). These progresses are tantamount to gender quota legislation and constitutional amendments; other African countries such as Ethiopia (41%) and Mozambique (39.3%) have also achieved progress. The sub-Saharan African average stands at 27.0%, while Nigeria and many other African nations continue to have poor female representation (IPU, 2025). Throughout the continent, women's participation in government is still restricted by a lack of political will, cultural hurdles, and financial limitations.

In terms of female political representation, Nigeria, the biggest democracy in Africa, trails far behind. The country ranks the 179th country out of 185 in the list of countries with women in parliament, having only 3.9% of seats in the lower house and 2.8% in the Upper house. This makes the country one of the lowest in the world with women in parliament (IPU, 2025). When compared to other nations like Ghana (14.6%) and Kenya (23.3%), this sharp disparity is apparent. Nigerian women still confront systemic obstacles such as patriarchal systems, electoral violence, and insufficient political party backing, despite several advocacy initiatives. Legislative changes, gender-sensitive regulations, and cultural changes that promote increased female political engagement are all necessary to address these problems. The table below shows the percentage representation of women in the lower chamber of the national parliament in some selected African countries.

**Table 1: Women’s representation in parliament in selected African countries**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Africa | % representation of women in lower chamber in parliament |
| South Africa  Senegal  Namibia  Ethiopia  Mozambique  Kenya  Ghana  Nigeria | 45.8%  41.2%  40.6.%  41%  39.3%  23.3%  14.6%  3.9% |

*Source:* Authors compilation from IPU, 2025

Table 1 above shows the percentage representation of women in parliament in selected African countries. Nigeria's low female political representation is brought to light by this contrast, which also emphasizes how urgently policies supporting gender-inclusive governance are needed. Political parties as gatekeepers to political representation have a key role to play in enhancing women’s representation, especially in Nigeria, where the constitution does not guarantee independent candidacy. The percentage representation of Nigerian women in the legislature is too low to influence any bill despite the level of lobbying. The situation, therefore, calls for immediate intervention to improve their political status.

**Analyzing the Impact of Major and Minor Parties on Women's Political Representation in Nigeria**

Political parties are vital in influencing women's engagement in politics, as they oversee nomination procedures, allocate resources, and formulate electoral strategies that impact candidates' likelihood of success. In Nigeria, the division between major and minor political parties plays a crucial role in shaping women's political representation. Dominant political parties such as the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), hold significant influence, overseeing resource allocation and voter engagement. On the other hand, smaller parties tend to be more inclusive but face challenges in competing successfully in national elections. The relative impact of these parties highlights structural and systemic obstacles that obstruct women's success in elections.

Leading political parties possess substantial financial resources, significant political influence, and strong grassroots backing, yet they continue to be dominated by men. Securing party nominations for competitive positions is often challenging for women due to high nomination fees, internal party dynamics, and preference for male candidates (Adebayo, 2023; Johnson-Myers & Campbell, 2024). For instance, both the APC and PDP have a history of presenting fewer female candidates, particularly for critical roles like governorships and legislative positions in their key strongholds. Even when women receive nominations, they are frequently assigned to constituencies with lower chances of success, reducing their likelihood of winning elections.

Conversely, smaller political parties often provide women with greater chances to run as candidates, yet they lack the political power needed to translate these nominations into winning elections (Brannon, 2023; Kunovich & Paxton, 2005). Minor parties like the Allied People’s Movement (APM), Social Democratic Party (SDP), and Labour Party (LP) have frequently nominated women for prominent roles, such as presidential and gubernatorial elections. Nonetheless, these parties face challenges in competing effectively with larger parties due to their restricted financial resources, weaker grassroots networks, and limited ability to mobilize voters (Hoodfar & Tajali, 2011). Consequently, although they may enhance women's presence in politics, their candidates seldom achieve victory.

An important illustration of this dynamic occurred during the general elections of 2019 and 2023. In 2019, the APC and PDP presented notably fewer female candidates in key elections, whereas smaller parties nominated a higher number of women, including for presidential and governorship positions.

The tables below present the number and proportion of female candidates nominated by major and minor political parties in the general elections of 1999 and 2023.

**Table 2: The number and proportion of female candidates nominated by major and minor political parties in the 2023 general election**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Political Party | President | Vice President | Governor | Deputy Governor | Senate | House of Reps | State Houses of Assembly | Total |
| Accord  AA  AAC  ADC  ADP  APP  APC  APGA  APM  BP  LP  NRM  NNPP  PDP  PRP  SDP  YPP  ZPL  **TOTAL 18** | 0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  1  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  **1** | 0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  0  **0** | 1  2  0  1  3  2  1  1  3  1  1  2  0  0  1  3  1  2  **25** | 7  7  5  8  10  6  2  3  6  6  6  6  5  6  5  6  2  6  **102** | 8  2  0  9  6  8  4  2  4  1  4  10  8  5  1  9  5  6  **92** | 17  12  0  42  12  9  21  16  23  6  12  13  24  18  10  27  11  13  **286** | 34  118  17  89  132  45  74  23  72  34  57  72  69  43  39  69  19  40  **1046** | **67**  **141**  **22**  **149**  **163**  **70**  **102**  **45**  **109**  **48**  **80**  **103**  **106**  **72**  **56**  **114**  **38**  **67**  **1552** |

*Source:* Author’s compilation from INEC, 2023

Table 2 presents the political parties that took part in the 2023 general election, the female candidates nominated by each party, and the positions they contested. The table above clearly illustrates the extent of support for female candidates by major and minor parties. The table reveals that just one out of 18 political parties nominated a female candidate for the presidential position. The political party known as APM is a minor party. Consequently, neither of the two major parties (APC and PDP) presented a female candidate. The table further shows that neither major nor minor parties presented a female candidate for the vice-presidential position. However, three minor political parties (ADP, APM, SDP) had the highest number of female candidates (3 each) for the governorship race. Meanwhile, the APC nominated just one female candidate (in Adamawa state), while the PDP did not field any. Among the 102 female candidates for the Deputy Governorship position, the two main political parties collectively nominated 8 women, while a minor party, the ADP, independently nominated 10 women. Limited support from major political parties restricts women's representation in governance. This is the case as they leverage their financial power, organizational structure, and mobilization strategies to overpower smaller parties with limited reach and financial backing in most elections.

Data further reveal that minor political parties fielded the majority of female candidates that contested seats in the Senate, House of Representatives, and State Houses of Assembly. For example, the minor party, the NRM, fielded the highest number of female candidates -10 for the Senate while APC and PDP had 4 and 5 female candidates, respectively. This is also evident in the case of the House of Representatives, where the ADC party had 42 female candidates, double the number fielded by other parties. The scenario is again clear with representation in the House of Representatives, where the ADC fielded 42 female candidates, double the number presented by the APC, while the PDP had three candidates fewer than the APC. Similarly, the ADC and AA parties ranked first and second among political parties that nominated female candidates for the State Houses of Assembly elections. ADC had 134 female candidates, AA presented 118, while APC and PDP had 74 and 43 female candidates, respectively.

None of the major parties were among the top five political parties with the most female candidates in the 2023 general election. The top-ranked five political parties were all minor parties, as shown on the table. Leading the list is ADP with 163 candidates, followed by ADC with 149, AA with 141, SDP with 114, and APM with 109 female candidates. APC and PDP the major parties, fielded 102 and 72 female candidates, respectively.

The low representation of female candidates by major political parties has the potential to reduce the number of seats women can win, hence undermining the significance of high female candidates’ representation by minor parties, as illustrated in table 3 below.

**Table 3: The number and percentage representation of female candidates in the 1999 and 2023 elections**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | Political Office | Total no of candidates | No of Female candidates | % representation |
| 2019  2023 | President  Vice President  Senate  House of Reps  Governor  Deputy Governor  State House of Assembly  President  Vice President  Senate  House of Reps  Governor  Deputy Governor  State House of Assembly | 73  73  1,904  4,680  1066  1066  14,583  18  18  1101  3107  419  419  10, 225 | 6  22  235  533  78  274  1825  1  0  92  286  25  102  1046 | 8.2%  30%  12.3%  11.4%  7.3%  25.7%  12.5%  6%  0%  8%  9%  6%  24%  10% |

*Source:* Author’s compilation from INEC, 2019; Ugwu & Okoye, 2022; INEC, 2023

Table 3 illustrates the count of female candidates who participated in the 2019 and 2023 national and state elections. The table indicates that political parties nominated more female candidates in the 2019 election compared to 2023. This might have been influenced by the number of political parties involved in the various elections during the two election years. In 2019, 73 political parties participated in the election while in the 2023 election, only 18 political parties were cleared by INEC to participate in the election (INEC, 2019; INEC, 2023). However, despite this limitation, there was an overall decrease in the representation of women running for election in 2023. The table shows a comparison of the number and percentage of female presidential candidates, revealing that only one woman (6%) ran in 2023, compared to six women (8.2%) in 2019. In 2023, there were no female candidates for the vice-presidential position, compared to 30% representation in 2019.

In the Senate elections, 235 female candidates out of a total of 1,904 participated in 2019, representing 12.3%, while 92 women contested from a pool of 1,101 candidates in 2023, representing 8.4%. This reflects a variation of 143 candidates compared to the 2019 election and a 4% decline in the 2023 election. In 2019 and 2023, a total of 533 out of 4,680, representing 11.4%, and 286 out of 3107, representing 9.2%, female candidates, respectively, competed for seats in the House of Representatives. This shows a decrease of 2.2% from the 2019 election and a wide difference of 247 candidates compared to the 2019 contest.

At the state level, there is a noticeable decrease in the number of female candidates across various positions. Regarding the governorship candidates, Table 3 indicates that 78 women were fielded in 2019, representing 7.3%, while 25 women participated in the 2023 election, representing 5.7%. This shows a 1.4% decline and a decrease of 53 candidates between the two election periods. This trend is also evident among deputy governorship candidates, with 274 in 2019 and 102 in 2023, indicating a significant decrease of 172 candidates compared to the 2019 race. The 2023 state assembly elections across various states reveal a staggering disparity of 779 candidates. In 2019, there were 1,825 candidates, whereas in 2023, the number dropped to 1,046 showing a 2.5% decline from the 2019 candidates’ representation.

Across all the aforementioned positions, it is clear that the number of candidates who contested the 2023 election significantly decreased compared to those who participated in 2019. A key factor that contributed to this decline was the poor representation of female candidates by major political parties orchestrated by the dominant notion of male superiority. This action from political parties directly hinders the number and proportion of women who can secure election victories in various positions.

**Table 4: Number of Female candidates by Major political parties in National and State Houses of Assembly elections and seats won in 2019 and 2023**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | Major Political party | Senate | House of Representatives | State House of Assembly |
| 2019  2023 | APC  PDP  **Total**  Others  **Grand total**  APC  PDP  **Total**  Others  **Grand total** | 10 (2)  7 (5)  **17 (7)**  \*218 (Nill)  **235 (7)**  4 (1)  5 (1)  **9 (2)**  \*83(2)  **92 (4)** | 15 (8)  16 (3)  **31 (11)**  \*1  **533 (12)**  21(7)  18(3)  **39 (10)**  \*247(4)  **286 (14)** | 536 (15)  390 (26)  **926 (41)**  \*5  **1825 (45)**  74  43  **117**  \*929  **1046 (54)** |

*Source:* Onyeji, 2019: INEC, 2019, and INEC, 2023

Table 4 highlights the number of female candidates nominated by the two major political parties for the National and State Assembly elections in 2019 and 2023. It also discloses the total seats secured by each party. Numbers marked with \* on the table indicate the count of female candidates nominated and elected by minor parties, where such data is available. The table indicates that APC presented 10 candidates in 2019 and secured 2 seats, whereas PDP fielded 7 candidates and won 5 seats. This results in a total of seven seats. According to available records, only seven female senators were elected in 2019. This indicates that the two major political parties secured all seven (7) Senate seats held by women in 2019. In 2023, the two main political parties each nominated 4 and 5 candidates, respectively, but secured only 2 seats in total, with one seat won by each party. Minor parties (LP and SDP) secured the remaining two seats. As of 2023, only four seats in the Senate are held by women.

In 2019, the APC and PDP presented 31 female candidates for the House of Representatives and secured 11 of the 12 seats held by women in the house. This indicates that all the smaller parties that participated in the election managed to win just one seat. In the 2023 election, a comparable situation unfolded, with the dominant political parties securing 10 of the 14 seats held by women. As a result, minor parties secured only 4 seats, even though they fielded more female candidates compared to the major parties.

The table also reveals that in State Houses of Assembly across various states, the majority of seats were secured by major political parties, whereas minor parties won only a small portion of seats despite fielding more female candidates.

**Analysis of Electoral Performance of Female Candidates in the 2019 and 2023 Elections**

Despite efforts to promote greater female representation, women’s involvement in Nigerian elections continues to be remarkably limited. Female candidates encountered structural and institutional obstacles impacting their electoral outcomes in both the 2019 and 2023 general elections. The prevalence of male politicians, the structure of political parties, and electoral violence persisted as obstacles to women's electoral success (Innocent & Nwaoha, 2014; Tukura & Suleiman, 2024; Ugwu, 2024; Ugwu & Okoye, 2022).

During the 2019 general elections, merely 235 out of 1,558 candidates competing for seats in the National Assembly were women, accounting for 15.1% of the total participants. Out of 479 seats in the National Legislature, women secured only 19, accounting for roughly 4% (3.97%). In the end, merely 7 women secured positions as senators (6.4%) and 12 as members of the House of Representatives (3.3%), underscoring the considerable lack of female representation in leadership roles. At the level of gubernatorial races, just 4 out of 73 candidates were women. These were only deputy governors, as no woman held the position of governor, highlighting the significant gender imbalance in executive roles. This poor electoral result can be likened to the political party nomination process which is highly patriarchally driven, poor financial status and supports for women, poor support for women candidates and leadership. This view is supported by views in studies like Ugwu & Okoye, 2022; Tukura & Suleiman, 2024).

Female participation decreased in the 2023 elections, despite minor parties promoting more women candidates compared to major parties. In the presidential election, Princess Chichi Ojei of the Allied People’s Movement (APM) was the sole female candidate, but she garnered only a minimal share of the votes. There were no female candidates for Vice President, and none of the limited number of female governorship candidates won their races. However, six deputy governorship candidates emerged victorious across various states in the election. Six candidates were selected from the two main parties, with three from APC and three from PDP. In the legislative elections, 92 women ran for Senate positions and 286 for the House of Representatives. However, only 4 women secured Senate seats, making up 3.7%, and 14 were elected to the House of Representatives, accounting for 3.89%. The total percentage of women representation here is less than 4% in the national legislature. This signifies a decline from the 2019 proportion and could be detrimental to achieving favorable legislative bills, especially those that would be beneficial to women. This submission is supported by studies such as (Espírito-Santo et al., 2020; Wäckerle, 2023).

Across state assemblies nationwide, the APC and PDP endorsed 926 candidates out of a total of 1,825 women who contested in the 2019 election. Among them, 41 emerged victorious, while 4 seats were won by smaller parties, resulting in a total of 45 secured seats. In 2023, among the 1,046 female candidates who participated in the election, only 117 were fielded by APC and PDP. A total of 54 women secured seats in state houses of assembly nationwide, accounting for 5.2%. It is important to highlight that approximately 13 out of the 36 state houses of assembly in the country lacked female legislators. These states comprise Kano, Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, Jigawa, Katsina, and in the North West region; Yobe, Borno, Gombe, and Bauchi in the North East region; Abia and Imo in the South East; and Osun State in the South West. The North West zone had the lowest representation of women in state legislatures at 0.93%, whereas the South-South region recorded the highest female representation at 10.6%.

An analysis of female representation in state houses of assembly nationwide shows that the northern region recorded the lowest number of female legislators, with most states in the area having no women in their state legislatures. The southern states demonstrated greater gender sensitivity by endorsing more women in electoral competitions. This suggests that religious beliefs and cultural norms continue to restrict women's participation, most especially in the northern region. In contrast to the southern region, women enjoy greater visibility, although they still have limited voices due to patriarchal views. While societal norms, cultural and religious beliefs as well and male dominance significantly hindered women's participation in politics, the situation in the Northern part of the country is more worrisome. This view collaborates views in studies such as (Adamu, 2023; Ozden et al., 2021).

An analysis comparing the two election cycles highlights persistent challenges encountered by female candidates, irrespective of their party affiliation. Leading political parties APC and PDP nominated fewer women for both highly competitive and less challenging positions. Conversely, smaller parties showed greater willingness to nominate female candidates; however, their lack of political clout, financial backing, and grassroots support hindered these candidates' chances of electoral success (Brannon, 2023). This trend further engrains the systemic challenges and disadvantages women encounter in Nigeria's political framework.

Outside of party frameworks, the broader political climate in both 2019 and 2023 was unfavorable toward female candidates. Women were disproportionately impacted by electoral violence, intimidation, and vote-buying, hindering their ability to secure a greater number of seats (Atim et al., 2023; Ugwu, 2023; Mbah et al., 2020). Furthermore, conventional gender roles and societal views on female leadership continued to influence voter choices, as a significant number of Nigerians still perceive politics as a domain primarily led by men (Adamu, 2023; Egwu, 2020). Although there were efforts to promote gender inclusivity, these cultural and institutional obstacles remained present throughout both election cycles. If these systemic challenges are not adequately addressed, the electoral prospects for women in Nigeria will continue to be constrained, despite growing advocacy for gender inclusion.

**Barriers to Women's Electoral Success in Nigeria**

In addition to the aforementioned challenges encountered by women in electoral contests, women’s political opportunities are also shaped by the internal structures of both major and minor political parties beyond the nomination process. In major political parties, influential male elites frequently dominate decision-making, including the selection of candidates and the planning of campaign strategies. Women in these political parties often encounter unofficial obstacles, including gender prejudice, in securing campaign funding and attaining leadership roles within the party. Although steps like lowering nomination fees for female candidates and allocating leadership roles within parties have been taken to encourage women’s inclusion, these initiatives have not substantially increased their likelihood of obtaining competitive party nominations (Morgan & Hinojosa, 2018; Roza, 2010).

In contrast, smaller parties often portray themselves as more welcoming and open to supporting female candidates. Certain political parties have adopted policies promoting female involvement, including gender quotas for leadership roles and guaranteed candidacies for women in specific elections. Nevertheless, their structural shortcomings, including insufficient funding, weak national reach, and restricted voter appeal, hinder their capacity to transform gender inclusivity into electoral victories (Hoodfar & Tajali, 2011). Female candidates in smaller parties often participate in symbolic campaigns with minimal likelihood of success.

An additional significant challenge lies in how the public perceives political feasibility. In Nigeria, voters often support major parties due to their perceived competence in winning elections and governing efficiently. Women representing minor parties frequently face challenges in gaining support, as voters often perceive these parties as incapable of competing with the dominance of major parties. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle in which women seeking party nominations are more likely to be endorsed by smaller parties, yet their affiliation with these parties reduces their prospects of winning elections.

Enhancing women's political representation in Nigeria requires intensified internal reforms within major political parties, greater financial backing for female candidates, and the implementation of legal measures to enforce gender quotas. If such measures are not implemented, the disparity between party influence and women’s success in elections will endure, perpetuating the disadvantage faced by female politicians.

**Strategies and Policy Measures to Boost Women's Electoral Participation and Victory**

Although there is a growing global movement toward gender inclusivity in politics, Nigerian women still encounter numerous obstacles, both within political parties and the larger society, that restrict their full involvement in electoral activities. Despite earlier proposals of various policy interventions and strategic measures to boost their participation, implementation gaps persist and continue to undermine women’s political progress. Nevertheless, stronger and more tangible measures are needed to guarantee women's active involvement in Nigeria's democratic processes. This research highlights the renewed focus on implementing these strategies to improve women's participation in elections and representation in governance.

1. *Reforms in Legal and Institutional Frameworks*

Constitutional and electoral reforms are among the most impactful methods to enhance women's political participation. Implementing mandatory gender quotas and reserved seats, likened to those in Rwanda, Burundi and Senegal, can greatly enhance women's representation. Studies such as (Guariso et al., 2018; Kylili, 2018) have proven that the use of gender quotas has increased female representation in these countries. In Nigeria, various gender-related bills, including the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill, have been introduced but encountered opposition in the National Assembly. Should these reforms pass, they could require political parties to nominate a minimum proportion of female candidates for elections and guarantee fair gender representation in appointed positions.

2. *Gender Quotas and Political Party Reforms*

Political parties act as the main entry point for electoral participation, making their internal frameworks essential for shaping female representation. Political parties must be mandated by law to implement internal gender policies, such as allocating reserved leadership positions for women and substantially reducing or waiving nomination fees for female candidates. Numerous women face financial challenges in vying for party tickets, and tackling this problem would help establish a fairer competition. Moreover, party constitutions should include affirmative action measures to guarantee equal opportunities for women in nomination processes.

3. *Economic and Financial Assistance for Women Candidates*

A significant obstacle to women's success in elections in Nigeria is the expensive nature of campaigning. Money's impact on Nigerian politics disproportionately hinders women, who typically have less financial access than men. Creating dedicated funding mechanisms, like a government-supported Women’s Political Empowerment Fund, can offer financial support to women candidates. Moreover, collaborating with private sector entities, civil society organizations, and international donors can strengthen women’s campaigns and capacity-building efforts.

4. *Campaigns for Voter Education and Advocacy*

Public perceptions of women in leadership roles continue to influence voting patterns, frequently disadvantaging female candidates. A significant number of Nigerians continue to see politics as a male-centric arena, which deters women from running for office and restricts their chances of being elected. Nationwide campaigns for voter education and awareness carried out by INEC, National Orientation Agency (NOA), political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs), and women's advocacy groups at different levels and periods have the potential to change these perceptions.

5. *Safeguarding Against Electoral Violence and Coercion*

Harassment, intimidation, and electoral violence often hinder Nigerian women from actively participating in politics and elections. Numerous female candidates and their supporters have faced threats, attacks, and voter suppression strategies, hindering their ability to campaign successfully. Enhanced legal protection, stricter enforcement of electoral laws, and improved security measures must be established to protect female candidates throughout the electoral process before, during, and after elections. Dedicated gender desks in security agencies can play a role in combating gender-based violence in politics.

6. *Leadership Development, Capacity Enhancement and Networking*

Numerous women aiming for political roles often lack essential experience in leadership, skills in political strategy, and knowledge of campaign management. Creating training programs, mentorship opportunities, and leadership academies specifically designed for women can better prepare them for political roles. Initiatives led by civil society groups, political parties, and international organizations can provide women with training in public speaking, policy advocacy, election strategies, and creating networking opportunities. Highlighting the achievements of female politicians and fostering grassroots movements can help confront gender biases and inspire greater female participation in politics.

7. *Media Coverage and Advocacy for Women Candidates*

The media significantly influences how the public perceives political candidates. Nevertheless, women involved in Nigerian politics frequently face limited media coverage or encounter reporting influenced by gender bias. Promoting gender sensitive journalism and ensuring equitable media access for women candidates can enhance their visibility. Furthermore, social media campaigns and digital advocacy tools can be utilized to elevate the voices of female candidates and challenge harmful stereotypes.

**Conclusion**

Women’s political representation has been low at the global scale but worst within the African region particularly in Nigeria. This poor representation has been blamed on some cultural and institutional challenges that require comprehensive strategies to overcome. Although minimal advancements have been achieved over the years, more intentional efforts are required to dismantle the systemic obstacles hindering women's political participation. Legal and electoral reforms, including mandatory gender quotas and reserved seats, are required to enhance the number of women in the legislature. These measures would ensure an increased number of females in the country’s legislature at all levels.

This research is imperative since it exposes the number of female candidates presented by both major and minor parties in Nigeria’s (2019 and 2023) elections and their level of representation compared to other countries globally and within the continent. This research will awaken the consciousness of the Nigerian government, political parties, and policy makers on the need to enhance women’s representation and offer policy reforms needed to achieve increased women’s presence in leadership in Nigeria.

**Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)**

Option 1:

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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