

Structurally Masculinised Democracy: Women's Political Exclusion and Institutional Resistance in Nigeria (1999 - 2025)

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ABSTRACT

This article provides the most comprehensive synthesis to date of research on women's political participation in Nigeria from the country's democratic transition in 1999 to early 2025. Drawing on several peer-reviewed studies, institutional reports, and legal documents, the review examines the persistent under-representation of women in elected office despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments. Using a feminist institutionalist framework, the analysis demonstrates how informal political practices, monetised party primaries, patronage networks, electoral violence, and gendered insecurity, interact with formal rules to sustain structural male dominance. Quantitative trends reveal a modest peak in female representation between 2007 and 2011 (approximately 6-8 per cent in the National Assembly), followed by regression to 3.6-3.9 per cent after the 2023 general elections, placing Nigeria among the lowest-ranking democracies globally. The article advances the literature in three ways: it integrates political finance and gendered insecurity into a unified explanatory framework; it situates Nigeria comparatively within African quota regimes; and it shifts the research agenda from descriptive diagnosis toward institutional reform strategies. Across the reviewed literature, the most consistently proposed interventions involve quotas, campaign finance restructuring, and gender-responsive security frameworks.

KEYWORDS

feminist institutionalism, women's political participation, gender representation, affirmative action, democracy

I. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's return to democratic rule on 29 May 1999 reopened formal political space after decades of military authoritarianism. Yet more than twenty-five years into the Fourth Republic, women remain structurally marginal within Nigeria's electoral and legislative institutions. Despite constitutional guarantees of non-discrimination (Section 42 of the 1999 Constitution, as amended), ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adoption of the Maputo Protocol, and national policy commitments such as the National Gender Policy (2006; revised 2021), women's representation in elective office has stagnated and, following the 2023 general elections, regressed to historic lows of approximately 3.6 - 3.9 per cent in the National Assembly (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). This paradox, formal democratic consolidation without substantive gender inclusion, demands explanation beyond cultural determinism. This article approaches the Nigerian case through the lens of feminist institutionalism, which distinguishes between formal rules and the informal norms, practices, and power networks that shape political outcomes. While Nigeria's constitutional and legal architecture is formally gender-neutral, informal institutions, such as monetised

party primaries, patronage networks, “godfatherism,” and electoral violence, systematically privilege male incumbency and restrict women’s access to candidacy and office. These informal practices do not operate outside the state; rather, they are embedded within party structures, campaign finance systems, and security arrangements, producing what may be described as a structurally masculinised democracy.

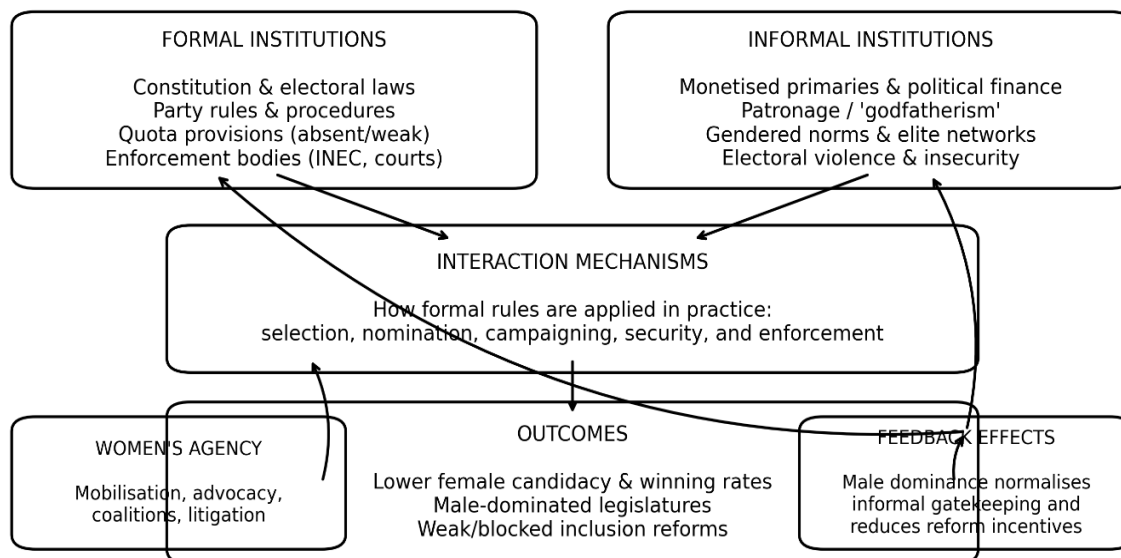


Figure 1. Interaction between formal and informal institutions shaping women’s representation in Nigeria (1999–2025). Source: Researcher’s compilation

Formal rules (constitutional and electoral frameworks, party procedures, enforcement) are filtered through informal practices (monetised primaries, patronage/godfatherism, elite networks, and insecurity). Their interaction shapes candidate selection and campaign conditions, producing persistent under-representation and reinforcing incentives that slow reform. The Nigerian experience also challenges assumptions drawn from other African contexts. Several post-conflict or reform-oriented states, including Rwanda, Senegal, and South Africa, have achieved significant increases in women’s representation through legislated or party-based quotas. Nigeria, by contrast, has repeatedly resisted binding quota reforms despite sustained advocacy. This divergence raises critical questions about elite incentives, institutional design, and the political economy of exclusion. Consequently, this review advances a more policy-engaged research agenda aimed at institutional transformation rather than descriptive reiteration. This review drew on complementary sources and using combinations of keywords and Boolean operators as well as grey literature and institutional reports.

II. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study is to analyse the institutional and structural factors responsible for the persistent under-representation of women in Nigeria’s political system from 1999 to 2025. Using a feminist institutionalist perspective, the study seeks to explain how formal political rules and informal practices interact to sustain male dominance within Nigeria’s democratic institutions.

To advance feminist institutionalist theory by analysing how informal institutions interact to reinforce women's political exclusion in Nigeria.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Historical Legacies and Legal-Institutional Frameworks

Scholarship consistently identifies Nigeria's colonial and post-colonial state formation as a foundational source of gendered political exclusion. Agbalajobi (2010), Okoronkwo-Chukwu (2013) and Eme et al. (2014) argue that indirect rule reinforced patriarchal traditional institutions in ways that marginalised women from modern governance structures. British colonial policy largely bypassed women in local administration except in rare cases (such as the Aba Women's Riot of 1929), thereby establishing a male-dominated bureaucratic template that persisted after independence.

The 1979 and 1999 Constitutions, though secular in orientation, retained ambiguities that scholars argue have been exploited to justify exclusion. Section 42 prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, yet the absence of specific quotas or temporary special measures has been interpreted by political elites as permission for the status quo (Matthias and Albert, 2025; Makama, 2013; Awefeso, and Odeyemi, 2014).

At the subnational level, the application (or non-application) of Sharia law in twelve northern states has generated particular concern. Imam (2019), and Bawa, (2017) document how purdah norms, early marriage, and interpretations of Islamic law that restrict women's public mobility have combined to depress female candidacy and voting in the north. However, Fitria (2025) cautions against essentialising Islam, pointing instead to elite manipulation of religious discourse for political ends.

B. Political Parties and The "Male Gatekeeping" Phenomenon

One of the most consistent findings across two decades of research is that Nigerian political parties function as the primary gatekeepers excluding women (Agbalajobi, 2010 and Adamu, 2023). Unlike many African countries that have adopted voluntary or legislated quotas within parties (e.g., South Africa, Rwanda, Senegal), Nigerian parties have resisted internal democratisation on gender lines. Studies show that even when parties adopt quota policies on paper (e.g., PDP's 2006–2010 30 per cent policy), implementation is routinely undermined by party primaries that are cash-and-carry affairs (Okoronkwo-Chukwu, 2013; Orji et al. 2018). The introduction of direct primaries in the 2022 Electoral Act has not significantly altered outcomes; rather, it has shifted the locus of monetisation from party executives to delegates (Iroye, and Okolo, 2023).

Table 2: Percentage of Women vs. Men in Elected Offices (1999–2023)

Election Year	Senate Women/Men in %	House of Representatives Women / Men in %	State Houses of Assembly Women / Men in %
1999	2.8 / 97.2	3.3 / 96.7	1.6 / 98.4
2003	7.3 / 92.7	6.0 / 94.0	3.9 / 96.1
2007	8.3 / 91.7	7.0 / 93.0	5.8 / 94.2
2011	6.4 / 93.6	6.8 / 93.2	6.3 / 93.7
2015	5.5 / 94.5	5.6 / 94.4	5.3 / 94.7
2019	6.4 / 93.6	3.3 / 96.7	4.7 / 95.3
2023	3.9 / 96.1	3.6 / 96.4	4.1 / 95.9

Sources: INEC (2023); Agbalajobi (2010); authors' compilation, cross-verified with IPU and NBS data. Note: Percentages are rounded to one decimal place for clarity; minor discrepancies in historical sources (e.g., 2007 Senate at 7.3–8.3%) reflect rounding variations but do not alter the overall trends.

Comparatively, these figures remain substantially below the sub-Saharan African average and dramatically below quota-adopting systems such as Rwanda, where women exceed 60 per cent of parliamentary representation

C. Key Insights from the Comparison

Persistent Male Dominance Across All Levels: Men have consistently held 91.7–98.4% of seats in the Senate, House of Representatives, and State Houses of Assembly since 1999. This underscores a structural gender imbalance, with women's peak representation (around 6–8% in 2007–2011) still leaving men in control of over 90% of legislative power. For instance, in the 2023 Senate, women occupy about 3.7% (4 out of 109 seats), while men hold 96.1% (105 seats). **Trends in Women's Representation vs. Stability in Men's:** Women's shares show modest fluctuations; a high in 2007 (Senate: 8.3%, House: 7.0%, States: 5.8%) followed by sub-5% representation in senate after 2023. House: 3.6%, States: 4.1%). Conversely, men's percentages remain remarkably stable at 93–98%, indicating that gains for women (e.g., post-2003 increases) directly erode only a tiny fraction of male-held seats, while setbacks for women (e.g., 2019–2023 drop) quickly restore male majorities.

D. Disparities by Legislative Chamber:

Senate: The most elite chamber shows the widest gender gap, with men's share never dipping below 91.7%. Women's representation peaked at 8.3% in 2007 but fell sharply to less than 5% in 2023, mirroring elite gatekeeping in party nominations.

House of Representatives: Slightly more inclusive, with women's high of 7.0% in 2007, but the 2023 low (3.6%, or 13 out of 360 seats) highlights vulnerability to electoral monetisation and violence, allowing men to reclaim 96.4%.

State Houses of Assembly: The lowest baseline (1.6% women in 1999), with men's dominance at 93.7–98.4%. Even at the 2011 peak (6.3% women), men held 93.7%, and 15 states elected zero women in 2023, exacerbating regional disparities (e.g., near-zero in northern states).

Broader Implications: This comparison reveals that Nigeria's democratic progress since 1999 has not translated into gender parity, with men benefiting from systemic barriers like party primaries and financing. This has since even become worse during the 2023 elections represent a historic low in the House of Representatives, with only 13 women elected out of 360 seats. Globally, Nigeria ranks 179th in women's parliamentary representation (IPU, 2025), far below the 26.5% world average. Across the literature, proposed responses cluster around three areas: (i) gender-responsive security protocols for candidates, (ii) clearer legal treatment of gender-specific electoral offences, and (iii) improved enforcement and prosecution. These proposals are typically justified on the grounds that impunity increases the deterrent effects of electoral gender-based violence (EGBV) and normalises withdrawal from competition.

E. Electoral Violence and Physical Insecurity

A growing body of feminist security scholarship highlights gendered electoral violence as a major deterrent to women's political participation in Nigeria (Anthony, 2022; Agbalajobi and Agunbiade, 2016; Olufunke, 2013; Arowolo and Aluko 2010). This form of violence manifests not merely as isolated incidents but as a systemic tool of exclusion, embedding patriarchal control within the democratic process itself. Women candidates, in particular, report disproportionately higher rates of character assassination, often through gendered slurs questioning their morality, family roles, or sexual integrity, sexual harassment, threats to family members, and outright physical attacks compared to their male counterparts (UN Women, 2023). These tactics serve to intimidate, isolate, and ultimately force women out of the political arena, reinforcing the notion that politics is a masculine domain fraught with danger for those who dare to encroach upon it.

The 2011 post-election violence, which claimed several lives nationwide, exemplified this gendered dimension, with female aspirants and supporters bearing the brunt in regions like the North Central and Southeast, where retaliatory attacks targeted women perceived as aligned with opposition parties (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Fast-forward to the 2023 general elections, and the pattern persisted with alarming intensity. The Lagos intra-party clashes, particularly within the All Progressives Congress (APC) primaries, saw female aspirants subjected to mob violence, including beatings and property destruction, as documented by the CLEEN Foundation (2024). More broadly, the UN Women's post-election assessment revealed over 200 reported cases of electoral gender-based violence (EGBV) during the 2023 polls, encompassing physical assaults on 45% of female candidates, emotional abuse via online trolling in 60% of instances, and sexual intimidation in 25% (Matthias and Albert, 2025; Evuti et al. 2025). In one stark example from Plateau State, a female House of Representatives aspirant withdrew her candidacy after receiving death threats and having her campaign office vandalized by political thugs, highlighting how such violence not only silences individuals but erodes collective female agency (FIDA Nigeria, 2023).

This surge in EGBV during 2023 was exacerbated by the Electoral Act 2022's failure to explicitly criminalize gender-specific electoral offenses, leaving perpetrators with impunity. The International Crisis Group (2023) noted that at least 15 women candidates across the federation abandoned their bids due to threats, contributing to the dismal 3.6% female representation in the 10th House of Representatives. Moreover, voter suppression tactics disproportionately affected women: in female-dominated rural polling units in states like

Imo and Enugu, attacks by armed groups disrupted voting, reducing turnout by up to 20% in affected areas (Adewara et al. 2025; Scholastica 2024). These incidents underscore a vicious cycle where violence deters participation, perpetuates underrepresentation and in turn, normalizes exclusion as a political strategy.

In the northern region, the intersection of insurgencies such as Boko Haram and banditry with electoral dynamics has further curtailed women's political mobility, transforming insecurity into a gendered barrier (Chigbu et al. 2025). Borno State, the epicentre of the Boko Haram conflict, recorded zero female candidates in the 2023 gubernatorial race, a direct fallout of ongoing threats that confine women to domestic spaces under the guise of protection (International Crisis Group, 2017; UNDIR, 2024). The group's tactics: abductions, forced marriages, and ideological indoctrination, have not only decimated communities but also weaponized gender norms, portraying women's public engagement as a threat to cultural and religious order (Okoli, 2022). Recent data from 2024 indicates that over 500 women and girls were abducted in the Northeast since the 2023 elections, with many survivors facing stigma that bars them from political involvement upon reintegration (Wilson Center, 2023). Banditry in the Northwest, including Zamfara and Katsina, has similarly targeted female mobilizers, with attacks on campaign convoys killing at least three women leaders in Kaduna during the 2023 off-cycle polls (FIDA Nigeria, 2023).

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study advances feminist institutionalist scholarship by demonstrating that Nigeria's gender gap in political representation is not merely a failure of inclusion but the product of an entrenched institutional equilibrium. While prior studies have documented barriers in isolation, this synthesis shows that party gatekeeping, political finance, electoral violence, and patronage networks operate as an integrated regime of exclusion. Feminist institutionalism distinguishes between formal rules and informal institutions. In Nigeria, formal rules, including constitutional equality provisions and electoral frameworks, appear gender neutral. However, informal institutions recalibrate these rules in practice. Monetised primaries redefine "eligibility" through financial capacity. Patronage networks redefine "merit" through loyalty and elite sponsorship. Electoral violence redefines "competition" through coercive risk. Together, these informal mechanisms create what can be conceptualised as a masculinised institutional filter, one that systematically screens out women before electoral outcomes are even determined.

The findings contribute theoretically in three ways. First, they extend feminist institutionalism by foregrounding political finance as a central informal institution. Much of the global literature emphasises cultural norms or party ideology. In Nigeria, however, exclusion is materially structured. Financial thresholds, nomination fees, and vote-buying practices function as institutionalised economic barriers. This shifts analytical focus from normative gender bias to political economy dynamics, revealing how capital concentration and gendered wealth disparities interact structurally with candidate selection processes. Second, the evidence supports an interactional model of exclusion. Rather than operating independently, institutions reinforce one another sequentially. Financial exclusion limits entry. Patronage constrains autonomy. Violence deters persistence. Weak enforcement sustains impunity. This cumulative mechanism produces path dependency, locking Nigeria into a low-representation equilibrium. The absence of quotas is therefore not neutral in

effect; it stabilises existing power hierarchies. Third, the comparative dimension clarifies elite incentive structures. African states that adopted legislated or party-based quotas altered the rules of candidate selection in ways that disrupted patronage monopolies. Nigeria's repeated rejection of binding quota reforms reflects strategic elite resistance. Within patronage-heavy systems, quotas threaten redistributive power flows. Thus, reform stagnation must be understood not as oversight but as rational institutional self-preservation.

The regression observed in the 2023 elections is theoretically significant. Democratic consolidation is often assumed to produce gradual inclusion. Nigeria's case complicates this assumption. Without institutional redesign, democratisation can coexist with gender retrenchment. Electoral continuity does not automatically generate representational equity when informal institutions remain intact. This study therefore proposes a conceptual reframing: Nigeria's democracy is not gender-neutral but structurally masculinised. Masculinisation here refers not to male presence alone but to institutional configurations that privilege male-dominated capital networks, risk tolerance shaped by violence exposure, and patronage hierarchies' resistant to redistribution. The concept helps explain why incremental advocacy and appointments have failed to alter legislative composition meaningfully. Implications extend beyond Nigeria. The study challenges universalist assumptions that constitutional equality or electoral reform alone can produce gender parity. In patronage-intensive democracies, gender exclusion may be embedded within the fiscal and coercive architecture of politics itself. Addressing representation therefore requires structural interventions that alter incentive systems, not merely normative commitments.

V. CONCLUSION

This review has demonstrated that women's political under-representation in Nigeria since 1999 is not episodic, cultural, or accidental as Nigeria's democracy is best understood as structurally masculinised: not simply dominated numerically by men but configured through institutional arrangements that advantage male-controlled capital networks, tolerate coercive political competition, and resist redistributive reform. The exclusion of women is therefore embedded in the political economy of electoral competition itself. The findings extend feminist institutionalist theory by foregrounding political finance and electoral insecurity as mutually reinforcing informal institutions. They also situate Nigeria comparatively within the African quota landscape, demonstrating that elite resistance to binding quota mechanisms reflects rational incentive preservation within patronage-intensive systems. In this context, reform stagnation is not policy oversight but a predictable outcome of elite coalition maintenance. The regression observed in the 2023 elections underscores a central theoretical insight: democratic continuity does not automatically generate inclusive representation. Without structural redesign, electoral cycles may consolidate rather than dismantle exclusionary equilibria. Incremental gains through appointments, advocacy campaigns, or voluntary party pledges remain insufficient when entry barriers are materially and coercively enforced.

The implications are both analytical and normative. Analytically, studies of gender and democracy in patronage-heavy contexts must integrate political finance, security architecture, and party institutional design into unified explanatory models. Normatively,

meaningful transformation requires enforceable institutional interventions. Legislated or party-enforced quotas, transparent and capped political finance systems, binding nomination procedures, and gender-responsive electoral security frameworks represent the most empirically supported reform cluster identified in the literature.

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