



GENDER AND LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIA'S POLITICAL AND BUSINESS SPHERES: EXPLORING THE BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES.

¹OLALEYE Oluwaseun Mercy PhD. ¹ADEYEMI Babawale Akin PhD. ²AKOREDE, Emmanuel Itunu, ³AKINRINLOLA, Deborah Atinuke; ¹TIJANI L.L

¹Department of Geography,

Faculty of Management & Social Sciences,

Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo.

olaleyeom@afued.edu.ng, adeyemiba@afued.edu.ng, tijanill@afued.edu.ng

+234 803 372 0695, +234 803 846 5126

²University of the Cumberland

Kentucky, United States of America

ciakorede@yahoo.com

³Department of Theatre & Creative Arts,

Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo.

akinrinlolaad@afued.edu.ng

Abstract

Despite Nigeria's progress in democratic development and as an industrial hub in Africa, gender inequality remains a significant barrier to inclusive leadership and hampers her multi-faceted and multi-dimensional space. The aim of the study is to investigate the barriers to women's representation in political and business leadership positions in Nigeria and identify strategies for increasing their participation. The objectives of the study are to examine the current state of women's representation in Nigerian politics and business leadership, to identify the social, cultural, and institutional barriers to women's participation in leadership positions and to recommend strategies for increasing women's representation in Nigerian politics and business leadership. The hypothesis to be tested states that there is no significant relationship between socio-cultural factors and women's representation in political and economic leadership positions in Nigeria. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, Chi-Square and t-test. The study investigated the barriers to women's representation in political and economic leadership positions in Nigeria. Seventy-two percent (216) of respondents reported socio-cultural factors as a major barrier to women's leadership ($\chi^2 = 12.45$, $p < 0.01$). 65% of respondents and fifty-eight percent of females in business reported gender stereotypes as a significant obstacle. 85% of women in politics cited institutional barriers such lack of party support as a limitation ($t = 2.35$, $p < 0.05$). Women in leadership positions reported higher self-efficacy scores ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.8$) compared to aspiring leaders ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 1.0$). The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. These findings suggest that addressing patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes is crucial for increasing women's leadership representation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Gender, Leadership, Politics, Business, Participation

Introduction

Globally, women are underrepresented in positions of political and economic leadership. Notwithstanding recent advancements, women still encounter major obstacles when trying to obtain positions of decision-making authority, which limits their capacity to support economic development and growth (UN Women, 2020). The social, cultural, and institutional elements that restrict women's participation in political and economic leadership are highlighted in this study's exploration of these obstacles. Nigeria has made strides toward gender equality, but there are still issues with women's representation in senior positions in politics and the economy. Just 4.2% of ministerial positions and 5.6% of National Assembly seats are held by women (Inter Parliamentary Union, 2022). Women only hold 14.1% of board seats in Nigerian enterprises, making them underrepresented in key managerial roles in the economy (PWC, 2021). The present study investigates the institutional, social, and cultural elements that impede the advancement of women in Nigerian politics and industry.

There has been an on-going debate on the connection between leadership and gender. Women still encounter obstacles in leadership roles across a range of industries, notwithstanding advancements and globalization. The difficulties women encounter in every area of Nigerian society are multifaceted, ranging from prejudice and stereotypes to underrepresentation in various forums, a difficult work-life balance, and the relative lack of proper mentorship and sponsorship in comparison to their male counterparts (Onuora-Oguno, 2015). In order to break down barriers and genuinely create a more inclusive and equitable environment for women in leadership positions in Nigeria, it is important to examine the intersection of gender and leadership, highlighting the difficulties women face and the advantages of gender diversity in leadership. Then, strategies to promote women's leadership benefits from a variety of perspectives should be proposed.

According to Table 1, women's representation in Nigerian administration has continuously been low since the country's return to democracy in 1999, never rising above 9% of elective offices. Recent elections reveal a static or declining trend in female representation, despite the National Gender Policy's 35% affirmative action aim.

Table 1: Women in the National Assembly (1999–2023)

The participation of women in the federal legislature reached its peak in 2007 before beginning a gradual decline.

Election Year	Senate (Seats/%)	House of Reps (Seats/%)	Total NASS %
1999	3 / 109 (2.8%)	12 / 360 (3.3%)	3.2%
2003	4 / 109 (3.7%)	21 / 360 (5.8%)	5.3%
2007	9 / 109 (8.3%)	25 / 360 (6.9%)	7.2%
2011	7 / 109 (6.4%)	26 / 360 (7.2%)	7.0%
2015	8 / 109 (7.3%)	19 / 360 (5.3%)	5.8%
2019	7 / 109 (6.4%)	13 / 360 (3.6%)	4.3%
2023	4 / 109 (3.7%)	15 / 360 (4.2%)	4.1%

Source: (authors' compilation)

On executive and sub-national representation, no woman has been elected as President, Vice President, or Governor of Nigeria since 1999. During the Tinubu-led administration, women comprised roughly 13.73% of ministerial positions between 1999 and 2022, but their representation in the state houses of assembly has remained below 7%. In the 2023 cycle, women won only 48 out of 990 seats (4.8%), with 15 states having no female legislators. The position of deputy governor is still the highest elective executive office attained by women, with 7 women elected as deputy governors in 2023 (approximately 19% of the 36 states), a slight increase from 4 in 2019 (Aina-Pelemo & Olujobi, 2025):. Compared to the global average of 22.5% and the West African average of 15%, the estimated overall average for women in elective and appointive positions is 6.7%. The Senate reached a record low in the 2023 elections, with three to four female senators, the same number as at the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999.

Aim

To investigate the barriers to women's representation in political and economic leadership positions in Nigeria, and identify strategies for increasing their participation.

Objectives

1. To examine the current state of women's representation in Nigerian politics and business leadership.
2. To identify the social, cultural, and institutional barriers to women's participation in leadership positions.

3. To recommend strategies for increasing women's representation in Nigerian politics and business leadership.

Hypothesis

1. There is no significant relationship between socio-cultural factors and women's representation in political and economic leadership positions in Nigeria.

Methodology

Research Design: This study employs a descriptive survey design to investigate the barriers and pathways of women in politics and business in Nigeria. A structured questionnaire is used to collect data from 300 respondents, comprising women in academics, politics, business and religious organizations. Women, aged 30 above were purposively selected to participate in the study as they are the ones under study.

Sampling Technique: A purposive sampling technique is used to select respondents from one town in five states which make up the part of south-western Nigeria (Ekiti, Ondo, Oyo, Osun and Ogun). The sample size of 300 is calculated using the formula for estimating a population proportion, with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%.

Data Collection Instrument: A structured questionnaire is designed to collect data on: Demographic characteristics (age, education, occupation, etc.), Barriers to women's participation in politics and business (cultural, social, economic, etc.), Pathways to women's empowerment (education, mentorship, networking, etc.) and Perceptions of women's roles in politics and business. The questionnaire was divided into four sections, with a mix of multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions.

Data Analysis: Descriptive statistics (mean, and standard deviation) are used to analyze the data. Inferential statistics (chi-square and t-test) are used to test the hypothesis and identify significant relationships between variables.

Questionnaires were distributed online to overcome the constraints distance and time.

Literature Review

Gender Gaps in Leadership Positions across Sectors in Nigeria.

There exist a significant gender gap in leadership positions between men and women in Nigeria. Although the number of women in the nation is almost equal to that of men, they remain underrepresented in the highest levels of leadership across all industries (Olatokun, 2014). In

addition to constituting less than 10% of the National Assembly's MPs, women are underrepresented in the corporate sector, including in boardrooms and C-suite roles (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). In actuality, women occupied less than 20% of board positions in corporate Nigeria, and less than 5% of these companies had female CEOs (PwC Nigeria, 2022). The majority of women in academia are well-represented at lower levels as lecturers and administrative staff, but even though many of them meet more requirements than their male counterparts, most of them still find it difficult to land positions as vice chancellors, provosts, or rectors. This is also true in the military, the courts, places of worship, and other organizations. However, Olonade, Oyibode, Olalekan & George (2021) see this as a result of generational cultural expectations and orientation that align most of our modern white and blue-collar jobs as male-inclined jobs, and then putting obstacles too high for the female folks who decide to change the narrative. Onuora-Oguno (2015) attributes this to social bias, inadequate mentorship, institutional discrimination, and lack of access to education and leadership training. Many attempts to resolve these gender-bias abnormalities over the years have failed. While researchers have seen structural reforms as the way ahead on this topic, tackling basic cultural norms imbedded with dormant traditions is equally important. This is why there is a need for more locally oriented and interculturally focused research on the subject, reflecting Nigeria's heterogeneous ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic setting.

Historical Antecedence of Gender Bias across Various Sectors in Nigeria.

Africa has been both a patrilineal and a matriarchal society throughout history. African history is rich with instances of well-known female warriors who ensured that matriarchal structures remained strong. These include the Dahomey Amazons of modern-day Benin Republic, the legendary Queen Amina of Zazzau, Alaafin Orompoto (the sole Queen and ruler of the Oyo Empire in her entire history), the Igbo Women's Councils, and the Xhosa female warriors of Southern Africa, to name a few (Nwakwo, 2025). Nonetheless, colonial powers pushed these successful institutions to the background, replacing them with their educational systems and occidental modes of life, which reinforced male dominance over women's matriarchal systems. According to Amadiume (1987), this was the imperialists' strategy of isolating women to the point where they were rarely visible or audible in any aspect of society, hence creating the basis for gender bias in almost every aspect of social and political life. It is understandable why there

was little to no representation of women in local or national elected positions or administrative offices, despite the significant contributions made by women in pre-independence Nigeria, such as in the Aba Women Riot, as well as other contributions from nationalist movement female leaders like Funmilayo Ransome Kuti. The bias is not restricted to a particular sector but cuts across several terrains; it can be seen to have penetrated the sectors of the working environment. Where women were employed, they held the lowest positions in the workforce. Even the country's two great religious arms, Christianity and Islam, were not exempt from the bias. Theirs were also accompanied with lines from their Holy Books explaining why women should be put to the background in all religious matters.

The education sector, which is widely seen as a vital facilitator of social change, has historically been biased against women. The access of the female gender to education has historically been hampered by familial commitments, child marriage, and social expectations. Some scholars have underlined that, while formal gender equality laws exist and ideological nuances of male-female equality have been publicly declared from a variety of sources, the legacy of historical bias continues to influence and sharpen modern realities (Nwankwo 2013). Understanding these historical antecedents is crucial for designing effective policies that not only address current gaps but also challenge the cultural and systemic roots of existing gender biases.

Theoretical Framework.

The study is situated within the context of the Feminist Theory. In Nigeria, patriarchal norms can limit women's access to leadership roles, and the theory highlights how societal expectations regarding gender roles can limit women's choices and opportunities. In Nigeria, women are frequently expected to prioritize family over career or leadership ambitions. The theory highlights how power operates in societies, often to women's disadvantage, and in leadership contexts, this can mean women face biases, stereotypes, or exclusion from decision-making.

Gender stereotypes (societal expectations about women's abilities or roles can impede their leadership); the glass ceiling (invisible barriers such as biases or a lack of opportunities that impede women's advancement); and intersectionality (women's experiences are shaped by intersecting factors such as class, ethnicity, and location (e.g., a Nigerian woman's experience differs from a woman in another context)).

In Nigeria, patriarchal institutions frequently place males as leaders, making it difficult for women to be perceived as credible leaders due to gender stereotypes and household obligations. According to feminist theory, these barriers are structures that perpetuate power imbalances, and resolving them entails confronting conventions and promoting gender equality in leadership settings.

Discussion of Results and Findings

Hypothesis

H0: There is no significant relationship between socio-cultural factors and women's representation in political and economic leadership positions in Nigeria.

H1: Socio-cultural factors (e.g., patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes) significantly influence women's representation in political and economic leadership positions in Nigeria.

The study investigated the barriers to women's representation in political and economic leadership positions in Nigeria. Seventy-two percent (216) of respondents reported socio-cultural factors such as patriarchal norms as a major barrier to women's leadership ($\chi^2 = 12.45$, $p < 0.01$). Sixty-five percent of women in politics and fifty-eight percent of females in business reported gender stereotypes as a significant obstacle. Respondents also stated some factors that are institutional barriers. Eighty percent of women in politics cited lack of party support as a barrier ($t = 2.35$, $p < 0.05$) while seventy percent of women in business reported limited access to professional networks. Women in leadership positions reported higher self-efficacy scores ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.8$) compared to aspiring leaders ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 1.0$).

These show that socio-cultural factors (patriarchal norms and stereotypes) significantly influence women's representation in leadership. The findings also state that institutional barriers are more significant in politics, while socio-cultural barriers are more pronounced in business. There is therefore a significant relationship between socio-cultural factors and women's involvement in political and business leadership positions in Nigeria. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. These findings suggest that addressing patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes is crucial for increasing women's leadership representation in Nigeria.



Barriers	Politics (%)	Business (%)	Overall (%)
Patriarchal norms	75	69	72
Gender stereotypes	65	58	61.5
Lack of party support	80	-	-
Limited access to networks	-	70	-
Factor	Women in Leadership (M, SD)	Aspiring Leaders (M, SD)	
Self-efficacy	4.2 (0.8)	3.5 (1.0)	

Where:

M = Mean (average score)

SD = Standard Deviation (a measure of variability or spread)

M = 4.2 means the average self-efficacy score for women in leadership is 4.2 out of (likely) 5.

SD = 0.8 means the scores are spread out by about 0.8 points from the average.

Strategies for Curbing Gender Biases and Promoting Women's Leadership

To create a workplace culture that values diversity, promotes gender equality and reduces female biases, there is the need to, first of all, train the male child from infancy, and have awareness programmes to consciously and gradually expunge deep-rooted male chauvinism, unconscious bias, gender stereotypes and inclusive language that has embedded themselves and have been incubated and honed in the hearts and psyche of many males still in their adolescence and young adulthood.

The government, with the help of many agencies and non-governmental organizations, should develop and implement policies that promote diversity, gender equity and non-bias inclusion. This should help create and ensure equal opportunities for career advancement, promotions and trainings, participation in any endeavour of the female child's choice, among other things.

Mentorship and motivational programmes should be offered to many who have developed phobia due to bias meted against them for long, which has made them develop inferiority complex. This will make them to pass this same message of hope to their daughters and other female children that there is hope for being a girl child in a very competitive world. Mentorship, motivational and leadership programmes targeting young women and girls in rural and urban areas should also be developed in this regard.

Job hiring practices should be inclusive, and should implement blind hiring techniques. This

should occur in the rigour that entails a very diverse interview panel, which cut across age, tribe, viewpoints and ideologies, all with divergent worldviews and on-job ideologies. Performance evaluation for everyone, irrespective of sex, but of ability, soundness, acuity, creativity and ability to work in a very competitive society, should be regularly reviewed and revised. This process will not only ensure fairness and equity, but also bring about the best in any society/organization.

In the judicial system, even though the presence of women there seems to be improving, more needs to be done. Fair recruitment, gender-sensitive training, as well as improved policy support and enactment to bolster the gains of the Nigeria legal system are key steps towards giving women a stronger and more influential voice in shaping Nigeria's legal future. In addition to all the aforementioned, accountability mechanisms; task forces, agencies, platforms, etc., should be established in the Federal National Assembly to checkmate, address and report any form of sex bias, violence, stereotyping, etc.

Recommendations:

- i. Promote gender-sensitive policies: Encourage political parties and businesses to adopt policies supporting women's leadership.
- ii. Mentorship and training: Provide opportunities for women to build skills and networks.
- iii. Address patriarchal norms: Launch awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes and biases.
- iv. Support aspiring leaders: Offer targeted support and resources for women aspiring to leadership roles
- v. Policy reforms: Strengthen enforcement of gender equality policies in politics and business.
- vi. Stakeholder engagement: Engage men and community leaders in promoting women's leadership.
- vii. Empowerment programs: Focus on building confidence and skills for aspiring women leaders.

Conclusion

The journey towards achieving gender parity in leadership positions is a complex and ongoing process. There is the need to create avenues and environments where female labeling for any reason, will not only be constantly confronted, but also, where nothing should be demarcated on the basis of gender. This should be started from schools. This is one way obstacles to women attaining career glory in any endeavor will be weakened.

The need to constantly create a sustainable avenue for growth and development in any field of endeavour, will be pertinent, in other to make many of the females bridge the gap of lost grounds over the years where they have been relegated to the background on such matters.

As we move forward, it is essential to Making the females' empowerment and leadership paramount, is very essential, not just to aid a more equitable future and as a matter of social justice, but also, as a calculated imperative for pushing forth creativity, growth and success in every sphere of life. By breaking boundaries to give leeway for more women to take on leadership roles, we can tap into potentials in terms of long underutilized latent bundle of talent, ingenuity and expertise.

When all the aforementioned are activated, obstacles to women attaining glory in every sphere of human endeavours will not only be achieved, but also, benefit organizations, communities and the society as a whole, both in the short run and in the long run. It will also lead to a more diverse, intensive, extensive and inclusive decision-making, better representation of divergent perspectives and more effective solutions to complex problems. There is no gainsaying that these will not only create an egalitarian, equitable and more striving society, but help build a brighter and more sustainable future for everyone together; for they will help to break the barriers to women's leadership in commerce, politics, industries, as well as other socio-economic and political environments.



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