


insights



A Wicked Problem?

Interrogating Women's
Representation in African Politics

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Introduction

With the gross underrepresentation of women in Africa's political leadership, one cannot but wonder whether this is a wicked problem - one too difficult to tackle and possibly too complex to be solved. Agreed, this is a historical challenge that requires a multi-pronged approach to addressing it, yet examples abound of countries that have moved from an era of less to one with high women's representation in their political spheres.

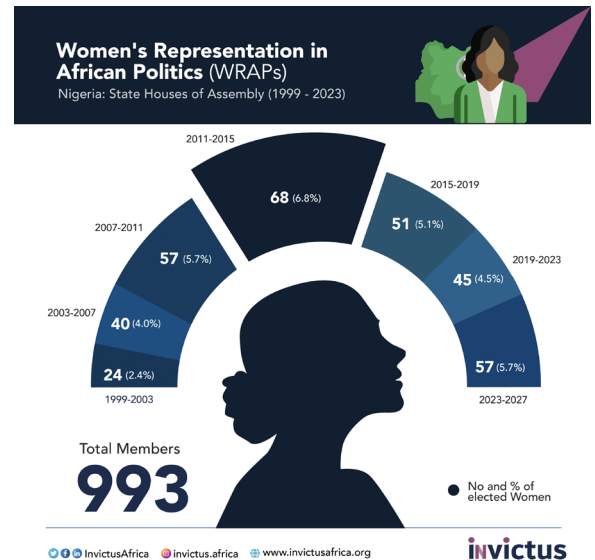
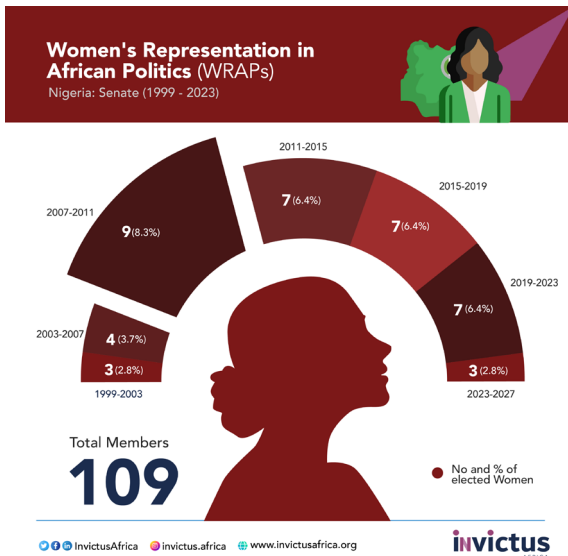
We live in a society where women are assumed to be unfit for leadership positions. Mostly, they are wrongly assumed to be good for house chores and only as kitchen managers. However, the involvement of women in leadership in Africa is not a new phenomenon. Women have been shown to be critical problem solvers. They led militaries during the pre-colonial period. They have been freedom fighters during the independence movements. They have attained transitional leaders during post-conflict periods. Also, one cannot forget their leadership roles during some of the worst economic, political, and health crises in the 21st century. Women have shown that there is nothing that a man can do that a woman cannot do, even better. The likes of Sarraounia Mangou, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Ibukunoluwa Abiodun Awosika, Obiageli "Oby" Ezekwesili, Zenzile Miriam Makeba and many more are among the few women in Africa who have fought their ways onto the ultimate cadres in their careers.¹ Nevertheless, the contending issue has been about their representation in politics, especially in Africa. The contentious issue has been how women are underrepresented in African politics, compared to men. Data confirms that women have not been adequately represented.

Data Don't Lie

Since the return to democracy in 1999, women's representation in Nigerian politics has been abysmally low. This is despite the population of women in Nigeria almost equaling that of men. As of January 2023, Nigeria's total population was 221.2 million, with women forming at least 49.5%. Since 1999, the population of women has not gone lesser than 40% of the total population in Nigeria.²

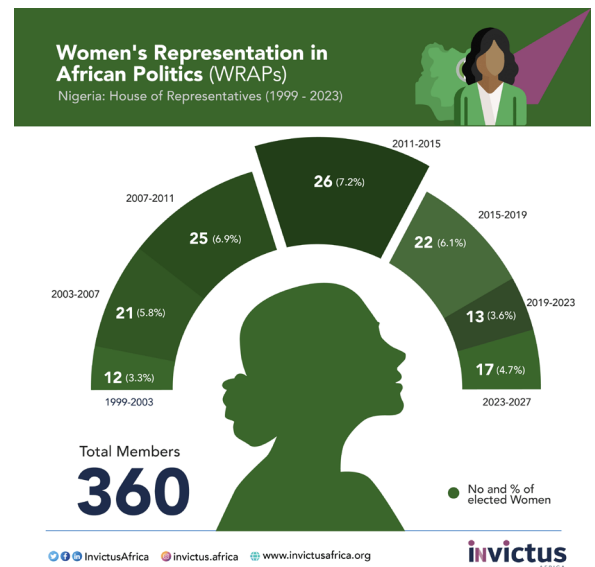
Despite this almost equaled population of women to men in Nigeria, men have taken a larger share of representations in Nigerian politics. For instance, in 1999, while the total population was 119,260,000, the population of men was 60,151,488 and that of women was 59,544,078. That makes the ratio 4:5 - women to men. Of all the total 11,882 elected available seats, women were elected only in 182 seats. This covered from the presidential to the councillorship at the ward level. Since 1999, while no female had been either president or governor of any state, there have been a scanty number of deputy governors. Out of the possible 109 senatorial seats in the senate, only in 2007 were there seven women elected - that is, 8.3%. The least is in 2023 where we have only three women elected as Senators - making it just 2.8% women's representation.³

Records show that no woman has assumed either the Senate Presidential or Deputy Senate seat before. At the Federal House of Representatives, of the 360 electable Members, only in 2011 were there twenty-six (7.2%) women elected, while the least was in 1999, with 12 (3.3%) elected female Members.



Generally, while women's representation in African politics has not been encouraging, in sub-Saharan African countries, women took more parliamentary seats in 2018 at a regional average share of about 23.7%. While the 2019 edition of the biennial Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)'s Map of Women in Politics shows that there has been an improvement in women's presentation in politics, the 2023 report from IPU shows that there is more improvement, as women make up 26.5% of Members of Parliament at large. There are countries that can be pointed at as setting examples in women's involvement in politics.⁵

For instance, Djibouti, which had zero representation of women in the year 2000, had a shocking rise in its women's representation. The country had an increase in 2018 from 10.8% to 26.2%. Also in Ethiopia, between 2017 and 2019, there was a massive increase in women's political representation in the executive branch, from 10% women ministers in 2017 to 47.6% in 2019.⁶ Rwanda is the leading country in Africa, and across the world, having the highest representation of women in politics. In 2022, women constituted 61.3% of Rwanda's parliament, while Cuba came second with 53.6%. Iceland with 47.6%, had the highest in Europe.⁷



Only once, in 2007, had a woman been elected as the Speaker of the House, Mrs. Patricia Olubunmi Etteh. She did not spend up to five months in the speakership role before she resigned after allegations of corruption. Facts from the State House of Assemblies have also not been encouraging. While some states have had few females as the state honorable Members, five states out of 36 have never had a female representation in their Houses of Assembly since 1999. In 2023, while Ekiti, Kwara, and Rivers States have the highest number of female

representative members in their Houses of Assembly, Adamawa, Nasarawa, Niger, Kaduna, and Anambra had one each. Alarming, thirteen States currently have no female representatives. These states are Abia, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Imo, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Osun, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara.⁴

It is clear that in these States, including those with very low women's representation, issues relating to women and gender perspectives to legislation, will either be absent or provided by men. Even where women are well represented, one cannot disregard the fact that these women are, themselves, plagued by their own intrinsic prejudices that prevent them from advancing gender-equal legislation.

What is the Problem?

The above data begs the questions: what, really, are the impediments to adequate women's representation in political leadership positions; and what must we do to address the identified challenges? There is a myriad of challenges that obstruct adequate women's representation in politics. Of the inexhaustive factors impeding women's political leadership representation, four will be highlighted in this paper.

One, there is the fundamental problem of cultural/traditional norms. This is the foundation upon which other problems are stacked. This is about the widespread belief that women are not meant for leadership positions, but subjects or properties of men. It is a norm that is seen as not wrong, even among some women who have been groomed with these norms. For instance, in many families, women observe some burden and a disproportionate share of domestic work among the children. This gender-based stereotypical trend has often produced or promoted discriminatory attitudes toward women, which affects transcend the family and community spheres to every other sphere, including political terrain.

Two, the male-dominated political party structures. This impediment is an extension of the aforementioned discriminatory gender norms. This is why most, if not all, political parties formulate laws and policies that only safeguard men's attainment of leadership positions. This is why, for instance, there is no political party in Nigeria where the female executive members, at any level, are equal to or more than males. These political parties only see women, through their structures, as auxiliaries. You only see women taking positions like women leaders, welfare officers, and assistants. Arguably, no woman has ever been the chairperson of any political party before in Nigeria. This model of politics will only always undermine the values that women can contribute in whatever form to the party and the nation.

Three, the "*Dirty Politics*" perception. If one asks why the second trend persists, the answer that often avails itself is "politics is dirty." This clause suggests that only men are meant to play dirty and not women. In fact, this third factor deceitfully projects that women are being protected. The truth is no man wants his wife, sister, or daughter to be harmed. However, if the notion is that women are being protected from "dirty politics," who protects men? Some will say a "man can protect himself."

Four, the Women's Retentionists' Attitude. Retentionists' Attitude is such that accept the status quo as norms and carry on with them. Most women have accepted to be men's subjects or property in the name of religious submissiveness, family preservation, and adherence to culture and tradition. Similar trends are depicted in the form of a legal framework, media bias, and others.

The various problematic trends highlighted above suggest that the hostility to women's representation in political leadership will persist until we find some lasting solutions to each of them, separately and jointly. What, then, is the way forward?

Women Representation in African Politics (WRAPs)

Nigeria: Female Representation in State Houses of Assembly (2023 - 2027)



Rank	States	Total No. of Seats	% of Elected Women	No. of Elected Women
1st	Ekiti	26	23%	6
2nd	Kwara	24	21%	5
3rd	Rivers	32	19%	6
4th	Akwa Ibom	26	15%	4
5th	Ondo	26	12%	3
6th	Lagos	40	10%	4
7th	Bayelsa	24	8%	2
8th	Cross River	25	8%	2
9th	Ebonyi	24	8%	2
10th	Edo	24	8%	2
11th	Enugu	24	8%	2
12th	Kogi	25	8%	2
13th	Ogun	26	8%	2
14th	Plateau	24	8%	2
15th	Taraba	24	8%	2
16th	Delta	29	7%	2
17th	Benue	32	6%	2
18th	Oyo	32	6%	2
19th	Adamawa	25	4%	1
20th	Nasarawa	24	4%	1
21st	Anambra	30	3%	1
22nd	Kaduna	34	3%	1
23rd	Niger	27	3%	1
24th	Abia	24	0%	0
25th	Bauchi	31	0%	0
26th	Borno	28	0%	0
27th	Gombe	24	0%	0
28th	Imo	27	0%	0
29th	Jigawa	30	0%	0
30th	Kano	40	0%	0
31st	Katsina	34	0%	0
32nd	Kebbi	24	0%	0
33rd	Osun	26	0%	0
34th	Sokoto	30	0%	0
35th	Yobe	24	0%	0
36th	Zamfara	24	0%	0
Total		993		57

- States that score the same percentage are ranked alphabetically.
- 13 States have no female representation in their Houses of Assembly.
- 5 States have never had female representation in their Houses of Assembly since 1999 (Bauchi, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Zamfara)

Date Stamp: June 19, 2023

Possible Way Out

If Africa is ready to harness the innate unique knowledge, skills, and talents that women possess in driving its developmental process and as a means of reclaiming the continent's future, then the impeding factors highlighted above must be deliberately, effectively, and progressively addressed. Without a doubt, women have been adjudged to be more than capable whenever they occupy leadership positions.

A transformed society can only start from a transformed home/family. This means that families and communities must eradicate the erroneous norms and mindset of females being only meant for house chores and soft work. Families and communities must adopt the principle of equality by entrusting girls and women with what they can entrust to boys and men. Suffice it to mention that if any government enacts a law to create equal opportunity for all genders, it will be demonstrated through institutions such as the workplace and political parties. Therefore, political parties must promote gender-balanced party systems, processes, and structures.

Women must also know that power is not given. Power is to be taken. Thus, the fight to take and stay in power requires strength, courage, and resoluteness. The tag "dirty politics" must not deter women from actively and consistently participating in politics at all levels. In essence, women must not be contented with being relegated to political activities that undermine their capacity and competence. This means women must demand more than being used just for running basic errands or for singing and dancing during political rallies. Women must see themselves as not a means to a political end but as ends in themselves.

A country that is ready to explore all advantageous attributes of women should also bridge the gaps by setting some percentage benchmark as affirmative action. For instance, while Rwanda constitutionally reserves 30% of seats for women in their legislative arm, South Africa's Municipal Structures Act of 1998 states that political parties should ensure 50% of their candidates are women, including being equitably

represented in ward committees.⁸ Moreover, any kind of discriminatory laws, policies, and practices that limit women's chances of running for office and winning should be eradicated. In all, there is a need for strategic and continuous sensitization of the custodians of cultures/traditions and political gatekeepers in order to positively change their behaviors which will, ultimately though progressively, result in a commensurate representation of women in political leadership.

Conclusion

So far, this paper has examined the context of women's representation in African politics, specifically in Nigeria. The paper found and showed that women's political participation and representation, since 1999, have not been encouraging. The paper argues that though discrimination against women in politics is not peculiar to Nigeria, Nigeria needs to emulate countries where there are greater numbers of women's representation, taking Rwanda and Cuba as case studies. The paper made a wake-up call to not only the duty bearers but also women to fight for what is duly theirs especially because women's political power has never been served a la carte.

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