

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN NIGERIAN POLITICS: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

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Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) within the political landscape of Nigeria represents a critical yet often overlooked challenge to democratic consolidation. This study uses a philosophical analytical method in exploring the multifaceted manifestations of GBV, ranging from physical assault and psychological intimidation and institutional exclusion, targeted predominantly at women in politics directly or indirectly. Drawing from empirical data, case studies, and feminist political theory, the research highlights how GBV systematically undermines female political participation, deters aspirants, and reinforces patriarchal power structures in the Nigerian political space. This study also examines the complicity of political parties, security agencies, and cultural norms in perpetuating violence against women in both electoral, judicial, and governance processes. By limiting women's participation in politics and silencing dissenting voices, GBV not only violates fundamental human rights but also weakens representative governance and democratic accountability. The paper concludes by recommending legal reforms, political or electoral reforms, as critical steps towards creating inclusive political processes where all genders can contribute equally to Nigeria's democratic development.

Keywords: Women, Leadership, Politics, Gender, Governance, Participation.

Introduction

Primarily, the culture of dominance by men (patriarchy) over women from various cultural backgrounds in Nigeria, from the earliest time, accounts heavily for the gender-based violence (GBV) in Nigerian politics, which represents a formidable obstacle to women's full and equal participation in democratic processes. Ushe (2018) remarks that:

Most cultures and traditions in Nigeria depict male dominance in all situations, and as such, females are inferior. These unfortunate belief systems have been a major obstacle to women's development in Nigeria and, as such, constraints to their contribution to national development. (pp. 286-287).

This background of (GBV) manifests in various forms, but is not limited to physical assault, psychological harassment, sexual abuse, online intimidation, and systemic exclusion within political institutions. Though according to Akinboye (2014), Nigeria has made formal commitments to gender equality through policies and international agreements, all these have not translated into meaningful protection for women in political life. Nigerian politics has been a male-dominated domain where women are treated and relegated to as outsiders, intruders, or where women are restricted to the role of domestic activities in the family. This reminds one of the past president of Nigeria, who believed that the place of a woman is in the other room, not on the political corridors of power. This exclusion is frequently enforced through acts of violence, stigmatization, illiteracy, religious beliefs, and so on. Women candidates are harassed, marginalized, and overpowered within the society in political processes. According to Okoth and Ochieng (2021), "Women in Nigeria who venture into politics frequently confront a political culture that tolerates, and at times encourages, gender-based intimidation as a tool of silencing opposition and maintaining patriarchal dominance" (p. 83).

Gender based political violence has almost become a normal and systematic way of living together in Nigeria in different cultural tribes, except for the struggles, interventions, and influence of human rights activists in the world over and liberal feminists. These groups serve as an empowerment energy for women, hence building up capable and qualified women in pursuing political careers and reinforcing existing gender hierarchies. Notwithstanding that, women constitute half of Nigeria's population, they are essentially and largely acknowledged for economic contributions, playing crucial roles in society, but the restrictive practices and constraints have not allowed them to take advantage of their numbers and position to significantly influence the political processes in the society (Ushe, 2018). Olojede (2019) argues that, gendered political violence is "strategic, not sporadic; it is rooted in structures of power that fear disruption by feminist leadership" (p. 117).

Moreover, political violence against women has implications far beyond gender equity. It undermines the principles of democratic consolidation, which require inclusive governance, equal participation, and

accountability. As the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2023) notes, “Electoral violence, especially gender-based violence, contributes significantly to low female participation in elections and political leadership” (p. 5). Without deliberate efforts to eliminate political GBV, Nigeria risks stagnating in a democratic system that is exclusionary and unjust.

Comparing the Number of Women in the Nigerian Political Structure and Its Implications

The number of women in the Nigerian political corridor is small in number when compared to the menfolk. One can strategically observe that it is men’s affair rather than that of women or for both genders. Even in the appointed political offices made by Presidents and governors in Nigeria, the number of women is relatively low compared to that of men. The worst of it all, is when viewed from elected office in the Nigerian women's political structure, only a few Nigerian politicians make it after the election to the elected offices. After Nigeria's independence, no woman has made it to the position of being a president or governor, except Governor Virgy Etiaba, who became a governor of Anambra state when the governor in the person of Peter Obi was impeached on November 2, 2006, by the Anambra State House of Assembly. His impeachment was later overturned by the Court of Appeal on February 9, 2007, which ruled that his removal was illegal and unconstitutional due to the Assembly not following due process. Apart from this, no other Nigerian woman has mounted the seat of governorship. The table shows the distribution of males and females in the Nigerian National Assembly.

A summary of Women’s Representation in Nigeria’s National Assembly from the 8th to the 10th Assembly: (culled from The Abuja Inquirer, 2025)

Assembly	Senate (109)	House of Reps (360)	Total Females	% of 469 Seats
7 th (2011- 2015)	9 Females	27 Females	36 Females	7.7%
8 th (2015- 2019)	6 Females	23 Females	29 Females	5.3%
9 th (2019- 2023)	8 Females	13 Females	21 Females	4.5%
10 th (2023- 2027)	4 Females	17 Females	21 Females	4.5%

From the above table, judging from the 10th National Assembly, it means that overall, women occupy only 4.2% of the seats among the 469-member National Assembly. This underrepresentation or low representation of women has been a source of worry in the growth of Nigerian democracy among her citizens. With this, a credible democratic structure may not be attained because it is imbued with gender-based inequality and violence through the electoral process. The highest number of women representatives is seen in the 7th assembly, from then till the 10th assembly, it has been decreasing or fluctuating, as the case may be, in the number of women in the Nigerian National Assembly. These patterns or the data above represent or reflect systemic barriers ranging from violence and intimidation to financial and cultural hurdles that women face in politics in Nigeria.

Again, when one compares the participation of women in different elections in Nigeria by gender, it shows the continuous dwindling of women in Nigerian politics, which portends serious national development in all sectors of the economy and political structures. For example, the table below shows a big margin between men and women in political participation.

Participation in Election in Nigeria by Gender in April, 2011

Office Contested	Female Candidates	Male Candidates	Total
President	1	19	20
Vice-President	3	17	20
Governor	13	340	353
Deputy Governor	58	289	347
House of Reps	220	2,188	2,408
Senatorial	90	800	890

Source: British Council (2012)

From the above table, a woman contested a presidential primary in the PDP in 2011, just as in 2023, one woman contested again under the APC, though she later stepped down for Bola Ahmed Tinubu. It is expected that the number of women vying for the position of presidency will be increasing, just like that of their male counterparts. But the reverse is the case even as of today, even in the political appointments by most governments, women are still neglected in most of the appointments. And the positive aspect of women's appointments is that they do well in various appointments. According to Ushe (2018)

Some of the few women who have occupied political and decision-making positions since 1999 have demonstrated sterling leadership qualities and outstanding track records of achievement. The contributions of such women as Mrs Abigail Ukpabi, Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, Dr. Okonjo-

Iwela, and Prof. Dora Akunyili have not only enhanced the viability of women in the national polity but also led to the general appreciation of the potential of women to serve as catalysts of social change. (pp. 297-298).

In Europe and other Western countries of the world, including some African countries like South Africa and Rwanda, the need to reserve a certain quota for women in appointments into political and decision-making positions, including political parties, is gradually gaining recognition and acceptance, but not in Nigeria. The case is quite different. This low participation of women in the politics of Nigeria contributed to the low global ranking of Nigeria in the world political arena.

Nigeria's Low Global Ranking in Women's Political Representation

One of the notable implications of the low representation of Nigerian women in the political structure of Nigeria is its low global ranking in women's political representation. Nigeria is found to be consistently ranked among the lowest in the world in terms of women's representation or participation in national parliaments and government political appointments. Despite being Africa's most populous country with a stable democratic process since 1999, the percentage of women elected to the National Assembly has remained below 8% over many election cycles. In the current 10th National Assembly (2023–2027), women occupy only about **4.5%** of the 469 seats, comprising 17 women in the House of Representatives and 4 women in the Senate, with one of the females in suspension over alleged misconduct for disrupting the Senate proceedings of the 10th National Assembly. This means that there are currently 3 women senators in the Nigerian National Assembly. This figure places Nigeria at the bottom tier of global rankings for gender exclusion in political governance.

According to the **Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)**, which monitors global parliamentary data, Nigeria ranked **184th out of 193 countries** as of 2023 in terms of women's representation in national legislatures (IPU, 2023). When compared with countries like Rwanda (61.3%), Cuba (53.4%), and Sweden (46.4%), it shows a much stronger commitment to gender-inclusive governance. For example, in African countries, some women are presidents as of today, like the President of Tanzania (Samia Suluhu Hassan), who has been serving as president since March 19, 2021, having served as vice president from 2015–2021. Again, the President of Namibia (Netumbo Nandi Ndaitwah) has been the current president since March 21, 2024, as of today, 2025. Some other African countries with female presidents in the past include Liberia, Malawi, Gabon, South Africa, and so on. But in Nigeria, the dream of a female president may not materialize in years to come due to some factors that persistently block gender participation. Not even a female vice president or female acting president, as it was in some countries like Gabon, Burundi, and the Central African Republic.

There are many reasons for Nigeria's poor ranking and low gender-based participation in the political process, which range from the primary process of electing a flag bearer under any political party. The hurdle at that initial point is full of corruption and illegal processes of selecting the ward delegates for the primary election in the party system. It is mostly sold to the highest bidder by the party officials, who most of the time are not women, because they cannot afford the kind of monetary inducement required, yet they are qualified to contest for the post in question. Structural and cultural barriers such as patriarchal norms, economic disadvantage, political violence, and lack of internal party democracy continue to restrict women's access to elective offices. Furthermore, the electoral system in Nigeria does not include any form of gender quota or proportional representation, which has proven effective in other countries to increase female political participation (Oloyede, 2016).

Civil society groups and international observers have repeatedly raised concerns about the underrepresentation of women and its implications for democratic consolidation and development. Women's marginalization in decision-making processes means that national policies often fail to reflect gendered experiences and priorities, thereby reinforcing systemic inequalities. The declining trend in female representation from 36 women in the 7th Assembly (2011–2015) to 20 or 21 in the 10th Assembly highlights the urgent need for political parties to restructure, implement legal reforms, institutional accountability, and cultural transformation to promote women's inclusion in Nigeria's political roadmap.

The Causes of Gender Base Violence (GBV) in the Nigerian Political Structure

The persistent underrepresentation of women in Nigerian politics during the election period or appointments highlights a critical challenge to the nation's democratic development. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and periodic elections, the political space remains heavily skewed in favor of men. One of the major, yet often overlooked, factors contributing to this imbalance is gender-based violence (GBV), which continues to deter women's participation across all levels of the political process. And yet women remain the highest in number compared with the number of men in Nigerian society.

Gender-based violence in Nigerian politics is multifaceted. It includes physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, online bullying, character defamation, and threats of harm, all aimed at discrediting or intimidating women involved in politics, especially if a woman is among the top contenders. These acts of violence are not random; rather, they are frequently used as strategic tools to maintain the dominance of male political actors and to discourage female political engagement indirectly. The normalization of such violence creates a culture of fear and exclusion, making it extremely difficult for women to campaign freely, express their views, or hold political office without harassment.

The inability to effectively address political GBV not only violates basic human rights but also threatens Nigeria's efforts at democratic consolidation. A democracy cannot thrive when half of its population is systematically silenced or sidelined from governance indirectly due to some factors. The problem, therefore, is not only about gender equity but about the integrity and sustainability of Nigeria's democratic project. Understanding and addressing gender-based violence in politics is crucial to creating a more inclusive and participatory political system that reflects the diverse voices and experiences of all citizens. Some factors make the political space hostile and unsafe for female participation and are often used strategically to maintain patriarchal dominance. The following factors can be traced to be the causes of low participation of women among other factors, in the Nigerian political space.

Patriarchal Culture and Gender Norms

One of the most entrenched causes of GBV in Nigerian politics is the pervasive patriarchal culture that views leadership and public authority as the exclusive domain of men. From early times and socialization, women are being looked upon as mere household wives and non-partisans in decision making process in the society, not even in the homes, hence they are discouraged from participating in public life and decision-making, and those who defy these norms often face backlash in the form of verbal abuse, intimidation, or violence (Ushe, 2018). Oloyede (2016) argues that "In Nigeria, politics is often seen as a 'man's game', and women who attempt to participate are perceived as deviating from traditional roles, making them targets of social and physical aggression" (p. 189). This cultural mindset breeds resistance to female political ambition and participation in governance.

Political Thuggery and Electoral Violence

Nigeria's political landscape is notoriously violent, especially during election seasons. Political thuggery, often funded by elite actors, is used to intimidate opponents. Women, due to their perceived vulnerability, are disproportionately targeted directly and indirectly. According to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) (2020), "women in Nigeria face increased risk of politically motivated violence, including threats, harassment, and physical assault during campaigns and elections" (p. 4). This violence can include physical attacks at rallies, vandalism of campaign offices, and targeted threats against female candidates and their families, even when they are elected and are performing their lawful duties. One of the case studies here is Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan, who represents the Kogi Central Senatorial Zone and is suspended from the Senate for six months due to allegations of misconduct and other offences. Even when reinstated by a court ruling, she is still being denied access to the Senate Red Chamber.

Inefficient Political Party Structures

It is a known fact that political parties in Nigeria often lack internal democracy and are dominated by male elites who control selection processes. Going further, most political parties operate based on money bags, whereby any politician with the highest amount of money normally gets the ticket from the party, and he or she owns the party structure. Primary elections are not done based on a fair process of election, on the party basis. In all these, women are sidelined through structural discrimination and high-handedness. In many cases, women are sidelined or threatened for seeking nominations, knowing that they can win in the primary elections. Omenugha & Umechukwu, (2019) agree that "Political parties are the primary gatekeepers of electoral contests, and when they fail to uphold gender inclusion, they indirectly enable a culture where violence becomes a mechanism of exclusion" (p.75). This institutional exclusion feeds into broader patterns of GBV as women try to push through unwelcoming structures.

Media Misrepresentation of Women

The media and digital platforms also play both positive and negative roles in enabling political GBV. Female politicians are often subjected to sexist attacks, misinformation, and character defamation online both during the electioneering and proper governance. Their personal lives, physical appearance, and morality are scrutinized rather than their policies or credentials. "Women in politics in Nigeria are more likely to be vilified or sexually objectified in the media, which fuels public hostility and incites online abuse" (UN Women, 2021). Social media, while being a useful campaign tool, has also become a space for cyberbullying and coordinated harassment

campaigns against women in politics, both directly and indirectly. It is always difficult for women to survive social media attacks used against them without the support of their colleagues or party. As in the case of Senator Natasha, people like Dr. Oby Ezekwesili and Mrs. Aisha Yesufu supported her strongly.

Funding and Poor Economic Base

Everything about democracy generally involves funding all over the world. Economic inequality also directly plays a huge role in the discrimination of women in the process of political and electioneering engagements, unless the woman is heavily supported by people around her to achieve her political ambition. Nigerian politics is capital-intensive, and economically marginalized women often lack the resources to finance campaigns or hire security. This financial disadvantage exposes them to further exploitation, godfatherism, and vulnerability. The cost of electioneering in Nigeria is allegedly one of the highest in Africa, and women's underrepresentation is partly due to their limited access to the financial networks that dominate political contests (ActionAid Nigeria, 2018). This lack of economic power also limits women's ability to legally challenge acts of violence and abuse.

Gender-Based Violence in Nigerian politics is not an isolated social problem but a systemic and interconnected issue rooted in the country's patriarchal traditions, violent political culture, weak institutions, exclusionary party systems, structural inequalities, religious and cultural barriers, and ethnic assumptions. Understanding these causes is critical for developing comprehensive strategies to protect women, promote inclusive governance, and strengthen Nigeria's democratic institutions for better governance.

Possible Solutions to Gender-Based Violence in Nigerian Politics

Addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in Nigerian politics requires a multi-pronged approach that combines legal reform, institutional strengthening, civic education, and social transformation that can be built patiently, to change the mentality or mindset of the male folk in Nigeria. These solutions will target both the **causes** and **enablers** of political GBV to create an inclusive and safe democratic space for women in the political sphere. Okemakinde and Tijani (2009) are of the view that the major or foundational pre-requisite for women's participation in Nigerian politics must come from the empowerment of women in the society, mentally and materially. These can be informed in the following ways:

Enact and Enforce Specific Legal Frameworks to Criminalize Political GBV

A major step toward addressing GBV in politics is the passage and enforcement of laws that specifically define and criminalize acts of political violence targeted at women and all offences relating to election malpractices. This will deter many oppressors from engaging in malpractices and violence against women. While Nigeria has adopted the **Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) 2015**, its implementation remains limited, especially at the subnational level, and this state of non-implementation of law hinders the drive for a better political society. Equally, the existing legal instruments need to be expanded to include specific sanctions against political actors and institutions that perpetuate violence against women in elections and public office (ActionAid Nigeria, 2018). Furthermore, the VAPP Act should be enforced in all 36 states, and provisions must be updated to reflect digital and psychological forms of GBV in politics.

Institutional Reform of Political Parties

For free and fair elections and participation in the political process in Nigeria, the political parties at the grassroots level should be reformed and upgraded to the level of keeping the laws binding on the political structure. Bearing in mind that political parties are the primary gatekeepers of electoral participation. Ensuring gender-sensitive internal party processes is crucial to preventing GBV. Parties should adopt enforceable **gender inclusion charters**, provide **clear sanctions for members who harass female aspirants**, and create **internal complaint mechanisms**. Political parties must develop gender policies that address violence and provide safe spaces for women to participate in party politics without fear (Oloyede, 2016). Quota systems should be encouraged to reserve some percentages for women in the corridors of power, as this helps to reduce hostile competition and enable smoother inclusion. Countries like Rwanda, China, and Uganda, reserve some percentage of seats for women in their parliaments. In Senegal, for example, 44% of women were elected to the seats of the National Assembly after introducing and implementing the parity law in 2012 (Women in Parliament, 2022).

Economic Empowerment and Campaign Support for Women

Given the high cost of political campaigns in Nigeria and in many other democratic countries of the world, economic disempowerment and funding of campaigns for various elections expose women to manipulation and violence. Public and private sectors can establish **campaign support funds or grants** for women, particularly those running at grassroots levels. Though this may not be easy without exposing women again to godfatherism, there should be a kind of support given to women through many ways, like reducing the cost of buying nomination forms for women, providing necessary supports like vehicles and funds for the campaign. Support structures such

as mentorship programs, funding access, and candidate training can help women compete on more equal footing, reducing their vulnerability to coercion and abuse (British Council, 2012).

Finally, tackling GBV in Nigerian politics, as noted earlier, demands more than reactive interventions; it requires preventive, systematic reforms that address structural inequalities, empower women, and hold perpetrators accountable. To come to this level of democratic process requires hard work from all sectors in rebuilding the nation. Legal, institutional, and social innovations must work in tandem to ensure a democratic environment where political engagement is safe and accessible for all, regardless of gender.

Conclusion

There is a need for equitable political participation of women is a fundamental prerequisite for genuine and democratic leadership, and a higher number of women generally contributes to sustainable national development (Ushe, 2018). For years, women have been marginalized and under-represented; they have recorded some measure of political achievements and sustenance of the emerging democracy in Nigeria. Since women's participation in politics and leadership is crucial for good governance, the challenges facing them need to be surmounted to create a good atmosphere to enhance equal participation in the democratic process among the Nigerians.

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