



## Original Research

# Gender Equity and Women's Inclusion in Governance Processes in Nigeria: Why Was the National Gender Policy's Affirmative Action Unable to Engender Desired Change?

Solomon I. Ifejika, Landmark University, Nigeria

Olayiwola V. Ojo, Landmark University, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** As from 1979, the United Nations formally seeks to achieve equilibrium in the involvement of women in relation to men in the public domain through the adoption and ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Nigeria both ratified and domesticated the core provision of this convention as its National Constitution of 1999 affirms the equality and right of all citizens to freedom from discrimination. Besides, from 2006 to 2021, Nigeria operated an exclusive gender policy namely, the National Gender Policy 2006, which by its affirmative action, reserved 35 percent of all appointive positions in government to women, as a means of protecting women's rights and redressing inequalities in the involvement of women and men in governance processes. Regrettably, the National Gender Policy (NGP) 2006 recorded no substantial achievement in terms of its intended objectives as the policy encountered several structural and institutional challenges arising from the entrenched patriarchal system in Nigerian societies, and the absence of a united women's movement in the country, among others. Resultantly, the study concludes that, for the NGP 2021 to realize its aims, Nigerian women's movements need to embark on vigorous and unceasing campaigns to deconstruct the existing patriarchal system, and that all women's movements in Nigeria need to form a central body and maintain a common front to better advocate for the implementation of 35 percent affirmative action in the new policy, among other measures. The study relies on secondary sources of data, including books, journals, relevant publications of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and the websites. The data were analyzed using the thematic and descriptive-interpretive techniques of qualitative data analysis, which enhanced satisfactory achievement of the objective of the study.

**Keywords:** Gender Equality, Governance, Social Integration and Development, Women's Inclusion and Representation, Women's Rights and Empowerment

## Introduction

Adequate representation and participation of women in the mainstream of society is popularly recognized as a foundation for inclusive development in the modern era. Viewed from both human rights and instrumentalism perspectives, women's involvement in every aspect of public life is unarguably persuasive. Within the context of human rights, all humans are born free and equal, and are entitled to equal rights and privileges as emphatically codified

in the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the various national constitutions of the majority of countries in the world. From the optics of instrumentalism, experiences have shown that women are endowed in many similar ways as their male counterparts, with the capacity to contribute, and have contributed significantly to the development of society. These facts underscore the sustained emphasis by the international community on eradicating all types of discriminatory practices against women in every sphere, through the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 on the platform of the UN. What is more, the Fourth World Conference on Women organized by the UN in Beijing, China from September 4th to 15th, 1995, suffices as the most crucial among the four conferences on women convened between 1975 and 1995. In the main report that emanated from the Conference, dubbed “The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,” which received harmonious adoption by 189 States, a major goal is to achieve satisfactory representation of women in all decision-making endeavors (UN 1996).

The UN remains committed to this monumental goal in view of the understanding that “empowering people, especially women, to strengthen their own capacities is a main objective of development, and empowerment requires full participation of people in the formulation and evaluation of decisions, determining the functions of societies” (Amadi 2017, 146). Most of the societies in the Northern Hemisphere have long embraced the idea and practice of gender inclusivism, where men and women have unhindered equal chances to actively participate in all societal undertakings, including economy, social activities, politics, as well as governance. Conversely, much of the developing countries are yet to break free from the shackles of male dominance over women in society. Hence, exclusion of people from participating in society based on gender, has remained a common feature of these weak and fragile regions. This is especially true about Africa, where many of the societies are originally patriarchal. This does not imply, however, that many of these nations have not experimented with certain measures to address the issue of exclusion and discriminations against women.

In Nigeria, particularly, “since the return of democracy to the country in 1999, there has been growing concerns over low participation of women in both elective and appointive positions” (Orizu 2021, para. 3). But the country has made deliberate legislative efforts toward eliminating inequity and upholding the right of every citizen to freedom in conformity with the international community’s expectations. To be precise, Nigeria has duly ratified and domesticated the UN CEDAW by integrating the major provisions of the convention in its extant Federal Constitution of 1999 to end every form of prejudice against women. In addition to this, from 2006 to 2021, Nigeria instituted and operated a national policy framework namely, the 2006 National Gender Policy (NGP). Until it was recently replaced with the revised NGP 2021, the NGP of 2006 was primarily dedicated to promoting and

protecting the rights of women and remedying the asymmetry between the male and female folks in governance processes in Nigeria.

In its affirmative action provision, the defunct NGP 2006 designated 35 percent of the entire appointive leadership positions in government to women as a way of advancing gender equity among women and men in the country. The policy, no doubt, has helped in some minimal ways; it has been especially useful in attracting the attention of the public to the rights of women and girls as well as other susceptible groups in Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], n.d.). However, in spite of the 2006 NGP's affirmative action stipulation, Nigeria has continued to perform abysmally in terms of women's involvement in governance undertakings as the male folk persistently dominate the scene. This study, which relies on data derived from secondary sources, therefore, investigates the major issues accounting for the inability of the 2006 NGP's affirmative action to attain its basic goal of increased women's participation in governance activities in Nigeria between 2006 and 2021. Consequently, it suggests workable measures for addressing the problems so that the revised 2021 NGP will not suffer the same ill-fate as its predecessor.

## **Historical Context of Asymmetric Gender Representation in Governance in Nigeria**

The hitherto history of Nigeria's political development is awash with subject matters of male dominance and falsity of women's involvement in public activities (Aina and Olayode 2011). During both the pre-colonial and colonial eras, there had not been equity between men and women on matters related to governance (Okafor and Okokuwebe 2015). Impliedly, the discrimination that Nigerian women currently experience in their bid to enjoy fair representation and involvement with men in governance and governmental decision-making processes did not start then. Nevertheless, colonialism majorly affected the status of women in Nigeria negatively. Notwithstanding the fact that the pre-colonial societies in Nigeria were majorly patriarchal, it seems that the political arrangements and ambience permitted some women to attain great political successes and accession to power by merit (Awe 1992; Udegbe 1998). Meanwhile, literature exemplifies that the colonial administration neglected the women, and that this has had adverse consequences for the position of women after the colonial regime (Udegbe 2004). For example, Erunke and Shuaibu (2013, 2) rightly trace the gender prejudice in Nigerian politics and governance today to colonialism, affirming that "...the western cultural notion of colonialism woven around male superiority reflected in their relations with Nigerians."

Colonialism came with many strange values and ideas that distorted the social position of the women in Nigeria, inclusive of the belief that women were only meant to play the role of housewives, an idea that was introduced by Victorian England. The admission of domestic subordination as the proper status of women inadvertently axed and inhibited societal

realities to the disadvantage of women (Awortu 2019). Agbalajobi (2010) corroborates colonialists' subordination of women by having written that the Sir Hugh Clifford Constitution of 1922, which was generally recognized to have laid down the earliest elective principles during pre-colonial Nigeria, excluded women and restricted the involvement of adult male to the affluent. This does not mean, as Agbalajobi posits, that gender inequalities of some sort were not experienced in traditional state and stateless societies in Nigeria, the point is rather that colonialism heightened the spate of gender discrimination in these societies. In traditional Yoruba societies, for instance, females occupied elevated political positions, such as Iyalode, Iyaloja, Iyalaje, and more than that, the office of the Oba, and they made various levels of widely felt political impacts (Agbalajobi 2010). Hence, in the words of Jaja (2015, 49), "...even though the society stereotyped women's role to mere household keeping and childbearing, women in the pre-colonial period did not limit themselves to those stereotypes, rather they competed with their male counterparts in economic, social and political spheres."

To lend more credence, the fact that the role of women in pre-colonial period was largely domesticated could not hinder some women like the legendary Queens Amina of Zaria, Moremi of Ife, Idia of Benin Kingdom, and Kampa of Opobo Kingdom from influencing the local political and governance processes of their societies tremendously (Jaja 1999). Queen Moremi engaged in political warfare and alone defended her society from enemies (Jaja 2015). Idia, the king's mother in the famous Benin Kingdom received much credit for serving as the key political adviser to her son, King Esigie and for using her warfare skills to protect the kingdom, setting it on the path of great successes (Bortolot 2003). Idia was the first woman to keep a distinct court and wear similar royal regalia as the Oba. Queen Kampa wielded enormous economic powers that enabled her to control her own locality within the Opobo Kingdom, and the achievements of Queen Karibasa (Kambasa) in Bonny Kingdom remain memorable (Jaja 1999). Mention must also be made of the heroic part played in politics by the famous Queen Amina of Zazau in Zaria, Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibandan, Princess Inikpi of Igala, and Emotan of Benin in the pre-colonial day (Erunke and Shuaibu 2013). Madam Efunroye Tinubu, an aristocratic traditional Yoruba woman, cannot be easily forgotten for her great influence in the political and economic fields in Lagos, precisely during the eras of notable Obas (monarchs), including Adele, Dosunmu, Oluwole, and Akintoye. With her political and economic powers, she helped the last two named Obas to gain political power. Thus, her contributions to the political development of her society before 1914 were outstanding. In Hausa empires, many women retained the titles and offices, in particular, the Iya, Magajiya, and Mardani titles. Possessing various titles, these women occupied prominent positions that were equivalent to those of the male folks in traditional Hausa society (Ikejiani-Clark 2001).

Additionally, women in pre-colonial Nigeria equally attained special political skills, which empowered them sufficiently to perform certain political functions that assisted in

shaping the pre-colonial political structure (Jaja 2015). The foregoing attests to the fact that women in pre-colonial Nigeria competed with their male counterparts in shaping the politics and governance of their societies despite their stereotyped role. But, following the institutionalization of the colonial regime, the women came to be alienated from these rights and privileges politically, but they still held on to their aforesaid traditional roles as obtainable in Yoruba societies (Agbalajobi 2010). Yet, largely, as Ezeani (1998, 100) posits, “the basic premise of the colonial gender ideology was therefore, the domestication of women. They were not to function in the public domain like the men.” Ezeani (1998) further states that the aim of education during the colonial order was to support men to gain skills that enabled them to function in public offices. Indeed, western education was like informal education because it also promoted stereotyping along gender lines. It served to prepare male children alone for available employment opportunities in the system (Jaja 2015), while education for female children was deemed unnecessary.

The implication is that, marginalization of women in public life was not limited to politics and governance alone, but extended to the education and economic spheres also. During the colonial regime, women in Nigeria were also refused access to formal employment, and their valuable role in agriculture, trade, and industry was first and foremost disregarded, and subsequently marginalized and undervalued (Ijere 1991). The view of Onwuka (2008, 53) corroboratively substantiates the above claims thus:

When western-type education was initially introduced, it was considered useful only because it prepared boys to be able to qualify for employment as clerks, interpreters, teachers, catechists, evangelists, stewards, cooks, [among others] for government offices, commercial houses and missionaries. Girls were not considered fit for such employment opportunities.

Even when the girl child’s education eventually began to be encouraged under the colonial regime, the purpose of the schools built for girls those times was to get them ready to be admirable mothers and wives, and not to be seen to take part in public life. Thus, western education created a severe division of incongruity regarding the role of women in colonial Nigeria, a state of affairs that increasingly elevated the status of the men half in the social hierarchy and demeaned women (Jaja 2015). This has not augured well for the nation’s development even until the present time.

In the submission of Awortu (2019, 77), “this heralded the process of marginalization of the womenfolk economically and their simultaneous exclusion from political and public life which they continue to suffer till today.” By denying them the right to education, the colonial master simply intentionally aimed to disenfranchise them when one puts into consideration the natural ability of African women to cause changes. Therefore, women were not given the chance to contribute their quotas to the progress of their society. But, despite efforts by the

colonial administrations to keep them in a permanent comatose state, politically, many Nigerian women strongly objected to that idea. Unforgettably, it was economic and political subjugation of women during the colonial time that resulted in the Igbo women's protest in Eastern Nigeria in 1929, popularly known as Aba women's riot (Jaja 2015), which featured the prominent role of Mrs. Margaret Ekpo. The same issue also informed the pro-active roles played by women political campaigners, such Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of the Abeokuta Women Union of 1948 and other women, who mobilized and agitated against the repressive colonial tax regimes (Erunke and Shuaibu 2013).

Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's political leadership role was epitomized in her enthusiastic advocacy and campaign for the assertion of the rights of Nigerian women. Also, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo was the sole female member of the seven-man committee formed in 1951 to institute a national political body with the aim of obtaining independence in the space of five years. More so, in 1959, Mrs. Ekpo assumed the post of vice-president of the Eastern House of Chiefs (Okafor and Akokuwebe 2015). History also recognizes Hajia Swaba Gambo of the Northern Element Progressive Union among Nigerian women, who defied all odds and took an active part in politics at that time (Erunke and Shuaibu 2013). Thus, in the face of colonial discrimination and repulsive policies, women in Nigerian societies resorted to varying group actions to advocate their political rights as in the pre-colonial period, during the colonial era (Jaja 2015). They constantly sought freedom from discriminatory practices meted out to them, and strove to take part in political leadership affairs of the society.

More pointedly, from the time of independence in 1960, there has not been a drastic change in women's participation in governance in Nigeria (Udegbe 2004). Some authors (Mama 1998; Mba 1989; Udegbe 1998) point to four features that described the experience of women in governance under military and civilian administrations after independence. These include the following: (1) women were insignificantly represented in government; (2) the pattern of gender politics that the state subscribed to was such that upheld governments' interests and that of a specific category of women; (3) wives of presidents, state governors, local government chairmen, and high government personnel appropriated the official status and influence of their husbands and ruled indirectly; and (4) token female leaders were selected, mostly to give the impression that government comprised men and women. Even at that, the presence of token women in government created increased self-recognition regarding gender roles and the likelihood of being identified as a certain brand of women (Fiske and Glick 1995). Hence, society wrongly perceived and stigmatized such women for taking up active responsibilities in governance alongside their male counterparts.

Women's experience remains the same down to the current fourth republic with respect to both elective and appointive positions; they have continued to experience persistent marginalization, dominated by men. At the beginning of the fourth republic in Nigeria, not even a single female governor emerged, but only one deputy governor, out of the thirty-six states of the federation. Similarly, no woman became local government chairperson, but only

one deputy chairperson emerged in the country. Added to the issue of abysmal representation of women as regards elective positions, women only filled less than 20 percent of the appointive positions. This shows that women's condition has not remarkably changed in the positive direction relative to the experience in the previous republics (Udegbe 2004). Based on Nigeria's 2006 population census figures, women make up 49 percent of the entire population of the country, still, there exists a wide gap between men and women in terms of political representation, economic management, and leadership (Okafor and Akokuwebe 2015). But, abundant evidence attests to the fact that women are an invaluable asset when it comes to operating in public offices (Aina and Olayode 2011).

President Goodluck Jonathan's administration attempted to change the status quo in Nigeria by increasing the number of women in main positions in government, but could not actualize the expected target for most women's rights activists and groups. Jonathan's administration saw a significant increase in the trend of women's representation in government from 10 percent in 2011 up to 33 percent in 2013, when he appointed 13 female Ministers from 42, constituting 31 percent and 4 Special Adviser from 18, making-up 23 percent (Jaja 2015). While President Jonathan was praised for his achievement of 33 percent increment in women's involvement in government, there were serious clamors from concerned actors for his administration to completely accomplish the 35 percent affirmative action as contained in the NGP 2006, in line with the practice in many African states (Orizu 2021), which was never realized. However, Jonathan's government featured prominent women, such as Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the then Coordinating Minister for the Economy and Finance, and Mrs. Stella Oduah, Minister of Aviation, whose outstanding contributions in their various offices greatly impacted the overall success of the administration (Jaja 2015).

A major syndrome in Nigeria is that "even though Nigerian Women have had a colourful history of achievements that could rival that of the men, female participation in governance has been far from satisfactory" (Jaja 2015, 52). Jonathan's government outperformed previous administrations and the one after it—President Muhammadu Buhari's administration in the effort to achieve greater women's participation in governance. During the campaigns for his second term in office, President Buhari promised, among other things, that women would form a gender-inclusive cabinet, announcing publicly, in fact, that women would comprise 35 percent of his cabinet. But when Buhari eventually publicized the names of his ministers, almost two months after assuming office in 2019, just seven women formed part of the 44-member Federal Executive Council. The addition of Folashade Yemi-Esan, the then Head of Service, only increased the number of women to eight. Women's representation in the President Buhari-led government was merely 16.3 percent, which negated the 35 percent he promised (Orizu 2021). With this, it can rightly be asserted that the Buhari government brought about a significant retrogression on the achievement recorded during Jonathan's era in fostering gender equality in governance.

Largely reinforcing the discriminatory attitude toward women is the widely held conservatives' thinking that the authentic role of women is ordinarily restricted to, and in fact ends in the kitchen (Erunke and Shuaibu 2013). Most societies commonly hold firm beliefs concerning distinctions between males and females in terms of interests, abilities, and responsibilities, and this stands as a hindrance to women assuming important leadership positions in government and industry (Udegbe 2004). Considerable number of women in Nigeria have acquired western education up to the topmost levels, coupled with other special skills that make them competent to occupy critical offices in government like the men, but the challenge is how to demystify the obscurity posed by the inherent patriarchal inclination of the society. This has blighted the nurturing of the culture of a gender-inclusive government in the country. The above scenarios reflect both how the men have explicitly and implicitly denied women their due rights of participation in the decision-making process in Nigeria, and how post-independence Nigeria has robbed itself of the potential contributions of women toward the political development of the country.

### **The Redeemer Cometh: The Fourth Republic and Emergence of NGP**

At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the UN concluded that inequality among men and women have continued, and that substantial barriers persist in this regard, with grave repercussions for the good of all people. It recognized that the growing poverty rates that affect the lives of most people in the world, especially women and children, which originates from within the national and international arenas (UN 1996, 2), aggravate this condition. The UN also reasserted its resolve to uphold:

The equal rights and inherent human dignity of women and men and other purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments, in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the Declaration on the Right to Development.

In consequence, the UN is certain that "women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace, [adding that] women's rights are human rights" (UN 1996, 2). This is in consonance with emergent worldwide trends, especially since the universal development agenda changed from the millennium development goals to sustainable development goals (SDGs) (FRN 2021). It therefore logically follows that gender equity is one of the essentials of the UN SDGs (Durosaye 2021).

The yearnings to empower women, give them a voice in decision-making and policy execution processes, and ensure that they take part in economic activities and income-making is hinged on the fact that it occasions substantial reduction in poverty incidences, better living standards, good governance, wealth generation, and job opportunities. To enjoy these benefits of gender balance and in accordance with the UN SDGs, numerous governments across the world have integrated gender equity into their economic and nationwide development plans and strategies. In following the footsteps of others, Nigeria instituted the NGP in 2006, after a comprehensive study and consultation exercise comprising several government and public sector development stakeholders and collaborators (Durosaye 2021). The NGP 2006 replaces the “National Policy on Women” (NPW) that the government adopted in 2000, which allocated 30 percent of appointive offices to women under the affirmative action guidelines (Orizu 2021). The NPW emanated from Nigeria’s unorganized national response to the several calls by the UN to eradicate from societies all types of discriminations based on gender and violence against women, who are embodiments of untapped potential for development (FRN, n.d.).

Nigeria, in 2000, took a brave action leading to the adoption and passing into law of the NPW in response to the cravings from various quarters on the foreign and domestic fronts to assimilate women wholly into national development, to such an extent that those gender biases that have emanated from structures and processes catalyzed by patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism would be eliminated. The NPW mainly drew from the guidelines of the universal CEDAW and its optional protocols, as well as the country’s National Constitution of 1999 in terms of its goals. The document was regarded as an instrument for achieving social equality, fairness, and a better quality of life in Nigeria by means of closing gender gaps and promoting equal opportunities for all the citizens. However, after six years of its operation, situation analysis, and reports on women’s living conditions, institutional procedures and results, and women’s access to public policy and political arenas showed that no substantial improvements were recorded. Gender discrepancies thus remained prevalent in majority of Nigeria’s spheres; in particular, the number of women in public offices remained very low despite efforts to improve on this aspect. At best, Nigeria only obtained *de jure* equity for women, but women’s *de facto* conditions were to the contrary (FRN, n.d.).

Concisely, along with other recognized inadequacies, the operational frame of the NPW was equally deficient; it aimed at integrating women into national development through the creation of observed related objectives and approaches into the sectoral constituents of the policy. This means that its agenda was to deal with specified issues within the sectors of the country’s economy. Nevertheless, the functional framework was not linked with extant sectoral policies and procedures as identified in the existing national development plan then, dubbed the Perspective Plans or National Rolling Plans. Although the gender programs were quite impressive, they were, therefore, not formulated within the context of the realities of the macro-policy plans of the government, inclusive of its arrangement for allocating resource. Women-

centered programs interfaced with government solely by the activities of the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs (MWA) and inter-governmental programs of development collaborators. This produced incongruity between government resources and operations, just as the programs were almost never entrenched or became permanent (FRN, n.d.).

The overall scenario precipitated the resolve that another strategy was required to attain the goal of women's empowerment. It was noted that even though women's empowerment is germane to the attainment of gender balance, gender equity policy plans should concentrate on the asymmetry of power relationships among males and females and institutional advancement, as a way of achieving social equity and empowerment and lessening poverty in society. As such, the MWA, which has the full responsibility regarding this goal considered it appropriate to accommodate this alternative development strategy and to translate the NPW to a more dynamic and vigorous document that would ameliorate the despairs of women and men in an innovative manner. This necessitated the formulation of a fresh NGP for Nigeria (FRN, n.d.). The Nigerian Federal Executive Council formally approved the NGP in 2006. Actions culminating in the adoption of the NGP were taken with the intention and purpose of addressing the concerns of women's disempowerment, feminine poverty, gender imbalance, and underdevelopment in Nigeria (Amadi 2017).

The NGP 2006 was integrated with the country's existing policy scheme—the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, which stands both as a plan for economic and a comprehensive policy for in-depth national re-orientation and development, promoting poverty alleviation and endurable and proportionate growth (FRN, n.d.). The whole idea of the NGP, therefore, was centered on the empowerment of Nigerian women. For Olayode (2013, 73), "the promotion of women's empowerment as a development goal is based on a dual argument; that social justice is an important aspect of human welfare and is intrinsically worth pursuing and that women's empowerment is a means to other ends." Given that the empowerment of women forms a prerequisite for achieving gender balance, the NGP made women's empowerment policies and programs a priority. This way, the NGP was eclectic in carving a niche with the various projections of the then extant NPW, majority of which could not transform to practice as they lacked institutional base and vigor. The strength of the NGP was that it fashioned apposite institutional arrangement that captures concerned issues, both at the macro and micro levels (FRN, n.d.).

The aim of the NGP was to eliminate poverty, attain gender equity, and promote inclusivity in governance and development processes (Amadi 2017). The specific aims of the policy were to:

- a) Institute the framework for gender sensitivity in every public and private sector policy and program.
- b) Foster the formation and appliance of gender mainstreaming strategies that are consistent with the macro-policy plan of Nigeria at any time.

- c) Support gender mainstreaming of every policy, program, and organizational values in Nigeria.
- d) Integrate the CEDAW and similar universal and regional systems that promote gender equity and women's empowerment in Nigeria's legislative processes.
- e) Advance equal opportunity in all spheres of the political, social, and economic lives of women and men in Nigeria.
- f) Support women-specific projects as a way of enhancing the capabilities of women and men to assist them in securing economic and political opportunities.
- g) Expose entire stakeholders on their duties and obligations in implementing the priorities of the policy (FRN, n.d.).

A major milestone of the 2006 NGP was that it embodied a 35 percent affirmative action for women; this affirmative action policy of the Federal Government required 35 percent women's involvement in entire governance processes (Olabimtan 2022). Therefore, objective five of the policy was expected to be achieved by; "...adopting measures, quotas and mechanism for achieving minimum critical threshold of women in political offices, party organs and public life by pursuing 35 percent affirmative action, in favour of women, to bridge the gender gaps in political representation in both elective and appointive posts, at all levels, by 2015" (Amadi 2017, 149). The NGP objective for the pursuance of gender equity policies comprised the fostering of a political leadership arrangement that would include women and men. The policy execution procedures included, but were not limited to advocating for the implementation of the African Union's fifty-fifty affirmative quota at every level, promoting better women's inclusion in political and executive positions, and advocating for an exhaustive review of the Constitution to make it gender-supportive. In pursuit of this goal of gender balance, the NGP implored all political parties to adopt affirmative action to continuously raise the number of women contestants for elective offices, and guarantee not less than 30 percent representation of women contestants in the 2007 federal elections, and an onward movement toward 50 percent representation by 2011 (FRN, n.d.). In spite of the lofty intentions and plans of the NGP 2006, it is regrettable that no substantial success was recorded during the active years of the policy in respect of the noble objective of actualizing gender equality in governance in Nigeria.

Nigeria continues to lag behind in terms of women's inclusion in elective (representative) and appointive positions, despite being the largest democracy in the continent. A report published in June 2022, by the Gender Strategy Advancement International (GSAI) shows that Nigeria's national average of women's inclusion in both elective and appointive positions remains at 6.7 percent, which is below the global average of 22.5 percent, African regional average of 23.4 percent, and West African sub-regional average of 15 percent. The GSAI report discloses that Nigeria ranks 181 among 193 countries with respect to Gender Equality Index, for countries with abysmal women's representation in

governance (Yakubu and Eromosele 2022; Adenekan 2022). Many countries in Africa maintain more impressive records of women's participation in governance than Nigeria, including her closest neighbors. For example, by percentage, 51 (63.8%) of 80 seats in the lower house of Rwanda's national parliament are occupied by women, and in the upper house, women have 10 (38.5%) out of 26 seats. In South Africa, women have 166 (41.9%) out of the 396 seats in the lower house and 19 (35.2%) of the 54 seats in the upper house. Cameroon's national parliament consists of 56 (31.1%) women in the lower house out of the 180 total seats and 20 (20%) women in the upper house out of the 100 seats. It is thus an irony that, in Nigeria, the supposed biggest democracy in Africa, women hold only 14 (5.6%) out of the total 360 seats in the lower house, and a meager 8 (6.5%) of the 109 seats in the upper house of the national assembly (Orizu 2021).

The situation is not any better when it comes to women's inclusion in appointive offices in Nigeria. Nigeria still ranks among the lowest in this respect, when judged in light of the scenarios in many countries in Africa. For instance, in Cape Verde, a country in West Africa, women occupy 9 (53%) of the entire 17 ministerial positions, which makes it the country with the largest number of females ministers within the African continent. The number of women appointed into ministerial offices in South Africa is 15 (41.7%) out of 36 ministerial slots, while women in Rwanda hold 11 (35.5%) of the 31 ministerial positions. In Burundi, there are 8 (34.8%) women among the 23 ministers in the country (Orizu 2021). When compared with Nigeria's 6.7 percent for both elective and appointive offices, it would be indisputable that the Nigerian state is yet to remove the existing barriers and welcome the women folk into its political and governance landscape, even with the NGP 2006 in place and being operational.

## **The Affirmative Action and Failure to Enthrone Gender Equality in Nigerian Governance Processes**

As mentioned earlier, the NGP 2006 lasted up to 2021, when the Federal Government officially replaced with the revised NGP 2021. Nevertheless, the policy undoubtedly failed to accomplish its main purpose of eliminating discriminations against the female half and promoting equity among women and men in Nigerian governance and politics. This study is of the view that the underlying explanation for the failure of the policy was that certain structural and institutional forces vehemently battled with the policy and hence bedeviled its noble goals and intentions. Key among these issues are, hereby identified and analyzed in turn, below.

### **Ingrained Patriarchal System**

A basic structural challenge encountered by the 2006 NGP was derived from the sturdy patriarchal structure in Nigerian societies. In Nigeria, as in most African societies, gender

inequality and discrimination against women in public life have persisted due to a resilient system of men's superiority and rule over women, which is profoundly rooted in the nature and character of these traditional societies. From its literary meaning, the term "patriarchy" denotes a societal arrangement in which men hold leadership power in all areas and women are mostly excluded from participating in leadership affairs. No doubt, "patriarchy as a system of male domination shapes women's relationship in politics. It transforms males and females into men and women and constructs the hierarchy of gender relations where men are privileged" (Wuya 2021, 21). This structure of inequality is innate in Nigeria and the majority of African traditional cultures and families, where the males are naturally ascribed a higher social status compared with the females, and this has long become well-integrated into public life, mainly in the economic and political status and assignments as clearly reflective in government activities (Okumagba 2016).

Women and men possess dissimilar biological and physiological frames (Okafor and Akokuwebe 2015), and "men are socialized in different role expectation and responsibilities assumption than the women" (Okumagba 2016, 57). In Nigeria, patriarchy most times shames and gives derogatory names to women for exhibiting political ambition and striving to assume leadership responsibilities in governance alongside men (Wuya 2021). Even, "within the traditional Nigerian society, women are not regarded when decisions are taken in community meetings and most instances within families and homes. Their opinions are not sought even in matters that concern them crucially" (Offiong, Eyo, and Offiong 2021, 80). These inequalities result in a low number of women in leadership and their woeful representation in public life (Adenekan 2022). Resultantly, despite the laudable intention of the NGP to improve women's representation in government through affirmative action, these systemic stereotypes typically constrained females in Nigeria in attaining top political and organizational leadership positions (Okafor, Fagbemi, and Hassan 2011). These stereotypical hindrances faced by Nigerian women are the by-products of the entrenched patriarchal status quo that formidably resisted meaningful realization of the NGP's utopian aspirations.

### Resistant Cultural Contexts

Nigerian societies sustain a very high cultural inclination and consciousness, which is jealously guarded against any debilitating forces. As such, cultural beliefs and practices exert almost an irresistible influence on social relations and perception about gender issues in Nigerian public arena. As in most African societies, societal norms in Nigeria promote the overt and covert subjugation of women and girls and aggravate inequity and exclusion of women from governance and decision-making (Adenekan 2022). In Nigerian societies, "the traditional social structures have been offering limited incentives for amending the existing distribution of power between men and women" (Mbah and Oti 2015, 26). Cultural norms and values have also transformed into general rules of codes in Nigeria, whereby women are

conditioned to behave in consonance with the cultural beliefs of their people. This socio-cultural dependence of women constrains them from adequately taking part in politics and governance endeavors (Wuya 2021), despite the opportunity espoused by the NGP. Undisputedly, the cultural practices across Nigeria mostly subjugate women and subordinate them to men in a manner that is detrimental to their self-worth, thereby planting low self-esteem in them and putting them in a disadvantageous situation, and leaving the men in an advantageous position in the social, economic, and political affairs (Okumagba 2016). Agbalajobi (2010, 79) supports Okumagba (2016) by asserting that “the overall impact of gender bias, cultural norms and practices has entrenched a feeling of inferiority in women and placed them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their male counterparts in the socio-political scene even in urban centres.”

For instance, given their basic tasks as mothers and wives and conflicting household duties and their role in providing care, women are restrained from getting involved in governance and politics (Wuya 2021). Repulsive socio-cultural practices like widowhood and female genital mutilation also restrict women’s access to public positions and roles as they exacerbate gender inequality and place a bigger burden on women (Okafor and Akokuwebe 2015). Further, cultural and traditional beliefs of most societies in Nigeria make them prioritize supporting the education of the male child over that of the female child, who should normally help in nurturing siblings while being prepared to get married. The effect of this is the increased illiteracy level among Nigerian women, which has incapacitated them to compete favorably with the male half for opportunities in politics and governance (Agbalajobi 2010). Agbalajobi (2010, 79) argues that “these socially constructed norms and stereotype roles make women overplay their ‘femininity’ by accepting that they are ‘weaker sexes,’ overemphasizing the dainty nature of their sex and regarding exceptional achievement as masculine.” The foregoing shows that the cultural terrains in Nigeria were abhorrent to the ideals of the NGP 2006 and thus contributed immensely in reducing its potency.

### Unfounded Religious Beliefs

As in culture, Nigerians are exceptionally religious. Nigeria is one of the most religious countries in the world, and adherence to religious faith mainly cuts across three major religions namely, Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. Christianity and Islam are not original to African people, but they have become the most influential religions in Nigeria. Be that as it may, religion has constantly shaped the relationship between men and women in Nigeria for centuries and embedded the male’s domination of the female into the social fabric of society, hence aiding the reinforcement of patriarchy, private property ownership, and class society (Attoh 2017). This way, religion is a tool for servitude, oppressing, marginalizing, and perpetuating under-representation of women in governance and decision-making in Nigeria, and most of the religious beliefs and traditions derive from cultural standards (Attoh 2017; Okumagba 2016). The Nigerian Federal Constitution

guarantees every Nigerian equal rights and freedoms, but in practice, the numerous religious laws and doctrines unfavorably affect the women and restrict their freedom to participate fully in society. Through religious teachings and indoctrinations, girls and women acquire knowledge about gender roles in accordance with their respective religious beliefs that make them subservient to men. This imposition of religious values, norms, and laws on women legitimizes the domination of men over women and their marginalization (Anigwe 2014).

Okumagba (2016, 57) substantiates the above claims as he concisely states thus: "Religion inclinations in Nigeria are sexist and patriarchal in structure and character, as they continuously seek to suppress women in all ramifications." Ironically, Christian and Muslim women in Nigeria have mostly regarded aspects of their lives that are affected by their faiths as both emancipation and empowerment (Anigwe 2014). Because of religious beliefs, most Nigerian societies prohibit women from engaging in politics following the notion that politics is a dirty game and profane, and thus can defile any spiritually minded person and cause him or her to lose eternity, as there is life after death (Erunke and Shuaibu 2013). In Northern Nigeria, for example, restrictive religious practices and the purdah system among Muslims also help to deepen deprivation and exclusion of women in governance processes (Okafor and Akokuwebe 2015). Under the purdah system, Muslim women cannot work alongside men and cannot accept any job offers outside their household unless they obtain permission from their husbands. Further, the profoundly engraved hierarchies in the Christian and Islamic laws make women's pursuit and attainment of gender equity more laborious and difficult (Anigwe 2014). Under-age marriage practice and its attendant denial of basic education equally contributes tremendously to the incapacitation of women. In view of the acute effects of these repressive religious laws, beliefs, and practices on women in Nigeria, it is difficult for any measure, such as the NGP aimed at liberating them, to easily make any substantial impact in terms of realizing their full rights and privileges in society.

### The Affirmative Action and Implementation Challenge

Affirmative action is, no doubt, a good measure for enhancing the representation of women in leadership and decision-making. As Agbalajobi (2010) maintains, Affirmative Action is perfectly a mechanism for promoting nondiscrimination in public life. The concept subsumes an array of policies or schemes aimed at checkmating discriminations and helping the susceptible segments of society. This type of policy procedure facilitates the formulation of laws that enhance equal chances for all persons and favorable transformations in the conditions of excluded groups. The UN instituted the CEDAW in 1979, and the convention is popularly described as an International Bill of Rights for women and a major step toward realizing the goal of women's empowerment and gender equality in all realms (Agbalajobi 2010). Most Members States of the UN, including Nigeria are parties to the convention, and have signed and domesticated it. Article 3 of the CEDAW demands that:

State Parties shall take in all fields, in particular in the political, social, economic and cultural fields, all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men. (UN 1979, 2)

An important point to note, however, is that the convention is meant neither to give women advantages over men nor to remain in force forever, but a temporary measure. As Article 4 holds:

Adoption by State Parties of temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women shall not be considered discrimination as defined in the present convention, but shall in no way entail as a consequence the maintenance of equal or separate standards; these measures shall be discontinued when the objectives of equality of opportunity and treatment have been achieved. (UN 1979, 3)

Concerning the institution of the required measures, “it is not the use of Affirmative Action that seems to be the problem but the practical effects and its linkage to fundamental ideas of fairness and justices” (Agbalajobi 2010, 79). In other terms, the practical implementation of the affirmative action is problematic, and in itself, this has remained a major hindrance to effort at ending discrimination against women in the political arena (Umeh, Melugbo, and Eze 2023). This challenge of the lack of effective mechanisms for implementing the policy stands out as a complex issue affecting almost every State in the world, including Nigeria when it comes to the women’s place in both elective and appointive positions (Erunke and Shuaibu 2013). Apparently, this was a fundamental obstacle to the effectiveness of the 2006 NGP’s affirmative action.

The lack of specificity in 1999 Constitution of the FRN on how to achieve adequate gender representation in governance, also adds to this implementation challenge. Even though the Nigerian Constitution refers to and prohibits any forms of discriminations against individuals by reasons of sex (Anigwe 2014), among other factors, such as ethnicity, religion, political opinions, it does not contain any specific provisions that aim to rectify the existing acute gender discrepancies in the country. Hence, the Nigerian constitution does not take into due consideration the disadvantaged position of women as it does not provide any framework for ensuring gender equality, unlike the constitutions of some African countries, such as South Africa and Uganda (Agbalajobi 2010). The absence in the Nigerian extant constitution of any of such particular provisions that could have been a source of strength and support for affirmative action was therefore another source of weakness of the policy.

### Absence of a Centralized Vibrant Women's Movement

There is no existing autonomous and unified umbrella movement for women or all women's groups in Nigeria. Evidently, Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet (2002) who compared the success records of women in Chile and their parallels in Nigeria, found that an important distinction between women in these two countries arises from the absence of a unified women's movement in Nigeria. They observe that state feminism is more feasible in a context where there is a fairly united women's movement that is capable of mounting political pressures and making requests, where women have access to political institutions and where sexual ideologies can be aggressively deployed to challenge the alienation of women. They, however, further maintain, in specific terms, that the solidarity deficit or the absence of a considerably united women's movement is the principal reason for the continued marginalization of women in Nigeria, particularly in the country's political administration. Ethnicity, according to them, majorly influences the types of women's movements that are formed in Nigeria and it serves as the structure upon which all social groupings, inclusive of women, access political institutions (Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet 2002).

It is widely agreed that an all-embracing women's movement in civil society is highly essential in supporting the objectives of gender equality. When women's movements organize and act concordantly in making political requests, the women tend to reap more benefits from such an arrangement than when they act independently. This is because working collaboratively enables women to interfuse their disparate experiences and events of subjugation or denial with wider social or political engagements and to present aggregated requests that would bring about positive changes. But, this has not been possible in Nigeria due to some reasons. First, Nigeria's political atmosphere since independence in 1960 has remained unsettled and characterized by the lengthy interval of military control. Secondly, the Islam/Christian dichotomy and ethnic struggles have continued to impede attempts at evolving a stabilized civil society in Nigeria. Third, following the economic crisis it witnessed in the 1980s, Nigeria's economy has been deteriorating steadily (Anigwe 2014). In consequence, it has remained very difficult for unified and formidable women's movements to emerge in the country. According to Madunagu (2008), most of the existing acclaimed women's movements in Nigeria can rightly be described as mere interest groups as they do not qualify to be called movements. The reason being that many of these groups lack a clear-cut guiding objective, mission, or vision and scarcely have organization and validity (Madunagu 2008). These realities make it easier to understand why women in Nigeria were unable to surmount coordinated political pressures that would result in the enthronement of gender balance in governance, in accordance with the affirmative action provision of the 2006 NGP.

## **Recommendations**

In view of the issues presented and analyzed above in relation to the defunct NGP 2006, there is the need for necessary actions to be taken by relevant stakeholders to protect the revised NGP 2021 from suffering the same ill-fate. As such, this study prescribes the following measures:

Nigerian women's movements need to leverage all available public platforms to carry out aggressive and constant campaigns to deconstruct the subsisting patriarchal orientation in the country. Such an unceasing advocacy by women would go a long way in asserting their position as having equal rights and privileges with their male counterparts in public life, thereby reducing negative sentiments against them to the barest minimum.

Women's movements at all levels in Nigeria, especially those operating at the community level, must rise to the occasion and begin to openly resist all discriminatory and repressive cultural practices in their communities that object to their full participation in public life, particularly in political and governance processes. This would certainly lead to positive outcomes in ending the marginalization and exclusion they currently face in societies. Where financial resources are available, initiating legal action against such offensive cultural practices would also serve well.

The National Orientation Agency of Nigeria has a crucial role to play in deploying the media in fighting against, and debunking erroneous religious teachings and doctrines leading to the false belief held by most Nigerians that politics is a dirty game, and not meant for those conscious of spending eternity in Heaven. This would also double as a sensitization and awareness-raising effort. Essentially, Nigerian Federal Government should outlaw all religious norms, values, and laws that prohibit women from participating in politics and governance, so that more women with potential can have the freedom to contribute meaningfully to the development of the country.

The Nigerian Ministry of Women's Affairs should propose to the Federal Government for an amendment of the revised NGP 2021 to provide a clause on the particular means of implementing the 35 percent affirmation action for women in relation to appointive leadership positions in government. Likewise, the Federal Government needs to amend the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria to insert a similar provision regarding the ways to ensuring gender equity in government appointive offices. These steps would help to strengthen the NGP 2021, and forestall a repetition of the implementation dilemma experienced with the NGP 2006.

All women's movements across Nigeria, irrespective of their disparate ethnic and religious backgrounds have to come together and form a well-unified and indomitable central body, with a common front and single voice on the issue of gender equity. This way, they can better push for full and proper implementation of the 35 percent affirmative action for women as contained in the 2021 NGP, from the Federal Government. Acting in

collaboration would be uniquely beneficial, as it would make women's advocacies more potent in influencing appropriate authorities to give desired attention to their yearnings.

## **Conclusion**

The women half makes almost 50 percent of the Nigerian population, as reliable population studies reveal. Notwithstanding, women in Nigeria have for long, largely been marginalized and excluded from participating fully in most aspects of the country's public life, including in governance and decision-making, even on matters that directly affect their collective interest as a vulnerable group. Even though some Nigerian women have struggled to break through the barriers and distinguished themselves, the vast majority of women continue to suffer acute deprivation, oppression, and domination by their male counterparts, leading to the denial of their human rights as citizens of the country. In an effort to change this narrative, the Nigerian Federal Government instituted the NGP 2006, which provides for the Affirmative Action policy that reserves 35 percent of all appointive positions in government for women, as a way of ensuring gender balance and boosting women's representation in leadership and decision-making affairs in the country. This was an indication of Nigeria's commitment to the international community's effort at promoting gender equality, in accordance with the requirements of the CEDAW, which the country is signatory to, and has domesticated. However, the NGP 2006, which remained operational until 2021, could not achieve this vital objective intended of it due to certain structural and institutional factors in Nigerian societies namely, the implanted patriarchal system, repellent cultural environments, unsubstantiated religious beliefs, difficulty in implementing the affirmative action, and nonexistence of a united women's movement in the country. For the 2006 NGP's successor—the NGP 2021, to record substantive achievements, therefore, it is essential that the respective stakeholders wholly embrace and vigorously apply the recommendations of this study.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Solomon I. Ifejika:** Lecturer, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Landmark University, Omu-Aran, Kwara State, Nigeria; Research Fellow, University of Religions and Denominations, Qom, Iran  
Corresponding Author's Email: [solomonifejika@yahoo.com](mailto:solomonifejika@yahoo.com)

**Olayiwola V. Ojo:** Lecturer, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Landmark University, Omu-Aran, Kwara State, Nigeria  
Email: [ojoo.layiwola@lmu.edu.ng](mailto:ojoo.layiwola@lmu.edu.ng)