



Women Representatives in the Legislative Arms of Government: a Comparative Study of Nigeria and the United States of America

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Abstract

This study examines women's representation in Nigeria's legislative arm of government in recent years, comparing it with the developments being witnessed in the United States. It explores how for instance Nigeria continues to record less than 5% female representation in its National Assembly over the years, different from what is obtained in the 119th U.S. Congress sworn in early 2025 and reached a historic milestone of 155 women legislators (26 senators and 129 representatives). This marks a steady rise from 149 in the previous Congress. It based its analysis within this comparative framework by examining the institutional, legal, and socio-cultural determinants of women's legislative representation in Nigeria and the United States. The research seeks to understand why women's representation in Nigeria remains disproportionately low despite decades of gender advocacy and legal reforms, while in the United States, steady progress has been achieved under a relatively similar democratic ethos.

Keywords: Women's Representation, Gender Equality, Legislative Participation, Political Representation

1. Introduction

The participation of citizens in political decision-making represents a central tenet of democracy. It involves the right of individuals to choose their leaders, hold them accountable, and influence governance through active involvement in political processes such as voting, contesting elections, and serving in legislative or executive offices. ^[1] Political participation encapsulates a range of activities, from forming political associations to direct involvement in governance and policymaking. As the Inter-Parliamentary Union emphasizes, equal representation is the right of all citizens to participate freely and equitably in political affairs without discrimination based on sex, class, or identity. ^[2] Despite notable progress in global advocacy for gender equality, women remain significantly underrepresented in legislative institutions worldwide. This democratic imbalance is particularly evident in developing democracies such as Nigeria, where women, though constituting nearly half of the population, continue to occupy less than five percent of parliamentary seats. ^[3] Although a significant number of women express interest in political engagement, the present systemic barriers in the country continue to discourage active participation and limit access to legislative power. Male political elites, who dominate the political space, often reinforce these patterns through exclusionary nomination processes and a lack of institutional support for affirmative action.

¹ A Mráz, 'Does Political Equality Require Equal Power? A Pluralist Account' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-023-10425-w> accessed 1 March 2026.

² E Rashkova and S Erzeel, 'The Field of Gender and Substantive Representation: Re-conceptualising, Measurement and Implications' *European Journal of Politics and Gender* (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821x16890760236494> accessed 1 March 2026.

³ O Ajose, 'Women in Nigeria's National Assembly: Historical Perspective (1999–2023)' *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology (IJISRT)* (2024) <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/ijisrt24oct230> accessed 1 March 2026.

On the other hand, the United States presents a more progressive trajectory, shaped by over a century of institutional evolution since the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, which granted women suffrage. Over time, the U.S. political culture has accommodated stronger advocacy movements, independent campaign financing networks, and mentorship structures. These institutional supports have contributed to the gradual increase in the number of women legislators and have enhanced the quality of representation in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Accordingly, the objectives of this paper are threefold which include to assess the legal and institutional frameworks governing women's representation in the legislative arms of government in Nigeria and the United States; to identify the socio-political and cultural challenges that continue to constrain women's participation and representation within the Nigerian legislative systems; and to propose reforms for Nigeria, drawing from the experiences and institutional practices of the United States, to promote greater inclusion and equality in the legislative process.

2. Conceptual Overview and Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Conceptual Overview

2.1.1. Representation

Representation is central to democratic governance, serving as the mechanism through which citizens' voices and interests are articulated within the political process. In political theory, representation has been broadly categorized into two dimensions: descriptive and substantive representation.^[4] Descriptive representation refers to the extent to which representatives mirror the demographic characteristics of the populace they serve, including gender, ethnicity, and religion. Substantive representation, on the other hand, focuses on the advocacy and promotion of constituents' interests, regardless of the representative's identity.^[5]

2.1.2. Concept of Legislative Participation

Legislative participation refers to the extent of involvement and contribution of elected representatives in the law-making process, committee activities, oversight functions, and constituency engagement.^[6] It encompasses both the quantitative presence and the qualitative performance of legislators in promoting responsive governance. Within a democratic framework, legislative participation by women is an indicator of political empowerment and equality.

3. Concept of Gender Equality and Gender Equity

Gender equality and gender equity, though closely related, convey distinct meanings in gender discourse. Gender equality denotes the principle of granting men and women equal rights, opportunities, and access to resources and decision-making positions.^[7] Gender equity, however, goes beyond equality by recognizing that historical and structural imbalances require corrective measures to ensure fairness.^[8] Equity entails the provision of enabling conditions such as quotas, mentorship programs, or targeted funding to level the playing field for women who have been historically marginalized in politics.

4. Concept of Political Participation

Political participation has been defined from various perspectives. It can be conceptualised as a set of voluntary activities by citizens aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and the policies they pursue. Verba and Nie define political participation as "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take."^[9] In broader terms, it has also been described as "a categorical term for citizen power," encompassing all activities aimed at influencing existing power structures. Political participation, therefore, is indispensable to democracy.^[10]

4.1. Theoretical Foundations

4.1.1. Feminist Legal Theory

Feminist Legal Theory offers an interpretive framework for understanding how legal and institutional structures perpetuate gender inequality. It argues that the law, often designed within patriarchal contexts, reflects and reinforces male dominance, thereby marginalizing women's voices in public and political life.^[11] Applying this theory to legislative participation reveals how electoral laws, party nomination systems, and campaign finance regulations may unintentionally sustain systemic gender bias.

5. Democratic Representation Theory

Democratic Representation Theory posits that the legitimacy of a democratic system depends on the inclusivity of its decision-making process. The theory asserts that effective democracy requires the representation of diverse social groups so that public policies reflect the interests and experiences of the entire population.^[12] Under this framework, the exclusion of women from legislative

⁴ M Hayes and M V Hibbing, 'The Symbolic Benefits of Descriptive and Substantive Representation' *Political Behavior* (2017) 39 31–50 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-016-9345-9> accessed 1 March 2026.

⁵ M Sobolewska, R McKee and R Campbell, 'Explaining Motivation to Represent: How Does Descriptive Representation Lead to Substantive Representation of Racial and Ethnic Minorities?' *West European Politics* (2018) 41 1237–1261 <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2018.1455408> accessed 1 March 2026.

⁶ M P Olson and J Rogowski, 'Legislative Organization and Political Representation' *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* (2024) <https://doi.org/10.1561/100.00022053> accessed 1 March 2026.

⁷ K G Peralta-Jaramillo, 'Challenges and Advances in Gender Equity: Analysis of Policies, Labor Practices, and Social Movements' *Social Sciences* (2025) <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14070401> accessed 1 March 2026.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ O Fayomi and G T Adebayo, 'Political Participation and Political Citizenship' (2017) 537–551 https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95232-8_32 accessed 1 March 2026.

¹⁰ V Bortnikov, 'Discourse of the Paradoxism of Citizens' Political Participation in the Development of Democracy' *Politology Bulletin* (2023) <https://doi.org/10.17721/2415-881x.2023.90.202-215> accessed 1 March 2026.

¹¹ M Marita and Y P Pramesti, 'Feminist Legal Theory as a Review of Legal Philosophy: Its Relation with Gender Equality in Indonesia' *Journal of Transcendental Law* (2023) <https://doi.org/10.23917/jtl.v5i2.4160> accessed 1 March 2026.

¹² Y-H Huang, 'Defending Exclusion: Combating Overrepresentation in Democratic Legislatures' *European Journal of Political Theory* (2025) <https://doi.org/10.1177/14748851251337311> accessed 1 March 2026.

institutions constitutes a democratic deficit. The presence of women in legislatures enhances deliberative quality and ensures that gender-related issues such as reproductive rights, education, and social welfare receive adequate attention.^[13]

6. Affirmative Action Theory

Affirmative Action Theory provides the normative justification for implementing special measures to redress historical gender imbalances in politics and governance. It is predicated on the understanding that formal equality alone cannot achieve genuine equality due to longstanding structural disadvantages.^[14] Affirmative action, through mechanisms such as gender quotas, targeted funding, and reserved seats, seeks to correct systemic exclusions and accelerate the inclusion of women in political leadership.

6.1. The Riggs Sala Prismatic Model

The Riggs Sala Prismatic Model, developed by Fred Wriggs, provides a valuable lens for comparative political analysis, especially between developed and developing societies.^[15] Riggs focused primarily on administrative structures; his model did not directly address gender dynamics in governance. Despite Riggs' contention that developing nations cannot be directly compared to developed ones, the inclusion of gender representation presents a meaningful front for comparison. For instance, some developing nations like Rwanda hold the highest level of female legislative representation in the world, with women making up nearly half or more of its parliament since the early 2000s, largely due to a constitutional gender quota system combined with voluntary party quotas.^[16] This system has enabled significant legislative achievements on gender equality issues such as laws addressing gender-based violence, inheritance rights, maternity protections, and land ownership for women^[17]

7. Women in the Legislative Arm of Government in Nigeria

7.1. Statutory Provisions

The Nigerian constitutional framework contains explicit commitments to equality and association that, on their face, support women's participation in public life. Two provisions are especially salient. Section 14(3) places emphasis on federal character and non-predominance in public appointments; the Constitution states in full:

"The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few State or from a

few ethnic or other sectional groups in that Government or in any of its agencies."^[18]

Section 40 guarantees freedom of association, an important building block for women's political organising. The provision reads:

"Every person shall be entitled to assemble freely and associate with other persons, and in particular he may form or belong to any political party, trade union or any other association for the protection of his interests: Provided that the provisions of this section shall not derogate from the powers conferred by this Constitution on the Independent National Electoral Commission with respect to political parties to which that Commission does not accord recognition."^[19]

Section 42(2) provides constitutional protection from discrimination and is the foundation for claims of gender equality under Nigerian law. Its text includes:

"No citizen of Nigeria shall be subjected to any disability or deprivation merely by reason of the circumstances of his birth."^[20]

Based on the foregoing, these provisions create a clear legal rationale at least at the level of principle for promoting women's inclusion in public office; hence, the constitution affirms equality, freedom of association and a public service reflecting the diversity of the nation. Yet, as practice and scholarship show, constitutional statements alone have not produced proportional female representation in the National Assembly. One immediate legal gap is the absence of an enforceable national gender quota in the 1999 Constitution. Nigeria has not enacted a binding statutory quota that reserves a fixed percentage of legislative seats for women at the federal level. Efforts to create such instruments have repeatedly stalled in the National Assembly (for example, multiple attempts to domesticate international obligations have not resulted in full incorporation of CEDAW into enforceable domestic law). Civil society and UN reporting have repeatedly noted Nigeria's ratification of CEDAW in 1985 but also the country's persistent difficulty in domestication and effective implementation of CEDAW standards in national law.^[21]

7.2. Empirical Data on Women's Representation in Nigeria's National Assembly

Since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999, Nigeria's national legislative landscape has consistently revealed the marginal presence of women in the two arms of the National Assembly (the Senate and the House of Representatives). The data to be considered below shows not only the low baseline but also a worrying pattern of stagnation or decline over multiple election cycles. For instance, in the first session of the Fourth Republic, only three women were elected to the

¹³ L Chaqués-Bonafont and C Cristancho, 'The Gender Divide in Issue Attention' *European Journal of Political Research* (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12437> accessed 1 March 2026.

¹⁴ E C A Bussinguer and E O R Pinto, 'Gender Affirmative Actions and Greater Participation of Women in Politics: Overcoming "Inaptitudes" with Amartya Sen' *Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental* (2024) <<https://doi.org/10.24857/rgsa.v18n9-189>> accessed 1 March 2026.

¹⁵ R Basu, 'Revisiting Fred W. Riggs' Model in the Context of "Prismatic" Societies Today' *Indian Journal of Public Administration* (2021) 67 87–95 <https://doi.org/10.1177/001955612111005632> accessed 1 March 2026.

¹⁶ F Chiazor, 'Do Quota Systems Lead to Substantive Representation?' *International Journal of African Sustainable Development Research* (2025) <https://doi.org/10.70382/tijasdr.v09i2.047> accessed 1 March 2026.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ s 14(3) Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, s 40

²⁰ *Ibid.*, s 42(2)

²¹ National Democratic Reform (NDR), *Gender Equality: Taking Another Look at Gender Bills in Nigeria's National Assembly* (30 April 2024) <<https://www.ndr.org.ng/gender-equality-taking-another-look-at-gender-bills-in-nigerias-national-assembly/>> accessed 7 April 2026

Senate (out of 109 seats) and 12 women to the House of Representatives (out of 360 seats).^[22] This equates to female representation of approximately 2.8 % in the Senate and 3.3 % in the House

A modest improvement occurred in the 2003–2007 term, with four women in the Senate and 21 in the House. The highest recorded total of female legislators came in the 2007–2011 period, where nine female senators and 27 female members of the House were elected—making a combined presence of 36 women in that 469-member Assembly.^[23] However, this peak was short-lived. From 2011 onward, the trend reversed. In the 2011–2015 term, women held seven Senate seats and 25 House seats. By 2015–2019, representation remained low and even dropped in some instances seven women in the Senate and 22 in the House (about 6.0 % in the House) for that term.^[24] In the 2019–2023 term, the situation worsened, as women comprised eight senators and just 13 House members for a combined female presence of approximately 4.5 % in the National Assembly.^[25]

The 2023 elections further illustrate the depth of the challenge. Out of 92 female candidates contesting for the Senate, only three succeeded. Meanwhile, about 286 female candidates ran for House seats and only 15 won.^[26]

These results place women’s representation in the incoming (10th) Assembly at roughly 4.2 % of the total 469 seats (with four female senators and 17 female House members).^[27] Several underlying factors help explain why these numbers are so low and why progress has been so difficult. Nigeria’s ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985, the development of a National Gender Policy in 2006 which prescribes 35 per cent affirmative action for women.

7.3. Structural Barriers to Women’s Legislative Representation in Nigeria

7.3.1. Party Nomination Systems and High Financial Costs

The process of political party nomination in Nigeria is widely acknowledged as one of the most formidable obstacles to women’s political advancement. Most major parties, including the All-Progressives Congress (APC) and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), operate through internal primaries that are often opaque, monetized, and dominated by entrenched political elites. Nomination forms for elective offices are notoriously expensive. For example, during the 2023 election cycle, nomination and expression of interest forms for the presidency cost ₦100 million in the APC and ₦40 million in the PDP, while Senate forms ranged between ₦10 million and ₦20 million. These exorbitant fees create an

economic barrier that disproportionately affects women, who generally have less access to political patronage networks and financial capital.

7.3.2. Patriarchal Political Culture

At the heart of Nigeria’s gender imbalance in politics lies a deeply patriarchal culture that shapes perceptions of leadership and power. The Nigerian sociopolitical environment continues to privilege men as the default leaders, while women are viewed as secondary actors or supporters. This cultural bias is reinforced through family structures, religious teachings, and community expectations that often discourage women from public engagement. As scholars such as Oloyede (2021) and Agbalajobi (2019) note, the prevailing social norms define politics as a “man’s world,” where women who aspire to leadership positions are frequently subjected to moral judgment, gender stereotyping, and societal disapproval. The patriarchal mindset is also evident in voter attitudes. Many electorates perceive female politicians as lacking the toughness or assertiveness required for legislative politics, especially in traditionally male-dominated domains such as security or economic policy. Consequently, even when women emerge as candidates, they often face lower levels of support from both party delegates and the general electorate. The cumulative effect of these cultural expectations is that capable and ambitious women are deterred from entering or sustaining participation in the political space.

7.3.3. Electoral Violence and Intimidation

Electoral violence remains a recurring feature of Nigeria’s elections and poses a direct deterrent to women’s political participation. Reports from the 2019 and 2023 general elections by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and international observers, including the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM, 2023), documented incidents of physical violence, intimidation, and harassment targeting female candidates and voters. Women who attempt to campaign in volatile areas often face threats to their safety, destruction of property, or even gender-based violence.^[28]

7.3.4. Weak Women’s Caucus Influence

Another factor inhibiting progress is the limited institutional influence of women’s caucuses within the National Assembly. While Nigeria’s legislature has established a “Women in Parliament Caucus” aimed at promoting gender-related legislation and solidarity across party lines, the caucus has struggled to achieve substantial outcomes due to its small

²² Kartay CA, ‘Party Structures and Women’s Representation in Nigeria’s National Assembly (1999–2023)’ *International Journal of Law, Politics and Humanities Research* (2025) 8(6)

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/394718564_PARTY_STRUCTURES_AND_WOMEN'S_REPRESENTATION_IN_NIGERIA'S_NATIONAL_ASSEMBLY_1999-2023> accessed 10 April 2026.

²³ The Nation Newspaper, National Assembly and Women’s Special Bill (25 March 2022) <<https://thenationonline.net/national-assembly-and-womens-special-bill/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

²⁴ Invictus Africa, Women Representation in African Parliaments (WRAPs) (2023) <<https://invictusafrica.org/women-representation-in-african-parliaments-wraps/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ugwu C, ‘Political Violence and Women’s Participation: Assessing the Impact of the 2023 Nigerian Elections on Women’s Political Engagement’

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<<https://doi.org/10.48028/ijprds/ijrhlir.v8.i1.12>> accessed 10 April 2026.

membership and limited political leverage. The low number of women legislators—often below 5%—means that they cannot form a voting bloc strong enough to influence key decisions or push through gender bills.^[29] For instance, the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill, first introduced in 2016, has repeatedly failed to pass second reading in the National Assembly, largely due to insufficient support from male legislators.^[30] The women’s caucus has also faced challenges in mobilizing cross-party coalitions and securing financial and technical resources to sustain advocacy efforts. According to research, internal divisions, limited capacity, and weak linkages with civil society organizations have further diminished the caucus’s effectiveness in shaping legislative agendas.^[31]

8. Case Studies of Women in the Legislative Arm of Government in Nigeria.

8.1. Patricia Etteh

Patricia Olubunmi Etteh’s election as Speaker of the House of Representatives in June 2007 was a landmark for Nigerian politics. She became the first woman to occupy the office, symbolising a breakthrough in an usually male-dominated leadership setting. Her tenure, however, was short and turbulent. Within months allegations emerged that the House had approved unusually large sums (reports cited N628 million) for renovations of the official residences of the Speaker and Deputy Speaker and the purchase of vehicles.^[32] Critics argued the contracts were irregular and improperly awarded. Intense media scrutiny, public outcry, and mounting pressure from civil society followed. The scandal turned into a test case for how female officeholders are treated in highly patriarchal and politicised environments.^[33] Etteh’s critics framed the controversy not only as a procurement issue but also through gendered commentary that amplified the reputational cost she bore. The pressure culminated in her resignation at the end of October 2007, less than five months after taking office.^[34] The Etteh episode demonstrates some lessons relevant to women in high legislative office that when a woman occupies an unprecedented leadership role, institutional controversies are often read through a gendered lens that magnifies reputational harm. In the same vein, weak internal rules and opaque procurement processes make leaders male or female vulnerable, but because of entrenched stereotypes, female leaders may be politically expendable.

9. Abiodun (Biodun) Olujimi

Senator Abiodun (often reported as “Biodun” or “Abiodun Christine”) Olujimi has been a prominent female voice in the

Senate and an example of political resilience in Nigeria’s male-dominated upper chamber. Olujimi served as Senator for Ekiti South (term beginning 2015) and has held leadership roles in the PDP’s state structures; her career also includes executive experience as Deputy Governor of Ekiti State (briefly in 2005–2006).^[35] Olujimi’s legislative record highlights active committee work, oversight, and spirited floor interventions; she has also faced the rougher side of politics electoral disputes, vocal confrontations with political opponents, and even direct threats to personal safety during violent by-elections (she has publicly recounted escaping gunfire during a bye-election in 2021). Her trajectory shows that legislative effectiveness for women often depends on building a local, activist base and on translating constituency service into political capital. Also, female senators who survive and thrive frequently combine legislative visibility with grassroots networks that can protect them.

10. Uche Ekwunife

Uche Lilian Ekwunife’s career illustrates how female politicians frequently navigate contest over electoral mandates and use legislative platforms to advance constituency and policy causes. Ekwunife served in the House of Representatives before entering the Senate (Anambra Central), where her 2015 victory was legally challenged and at one point resulted in her seat being declared vacant; she later returned to win again (2019). Throughout her parliamentary career she has been recognised as an active participant in debates, committee work and constituency matters.^[36]

11. Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan

One of the most consequential and recent case studies is Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan (10th Assembly), whose public allegation of sexual harassment against the Senate President and subsequent suspension crystallised core problems facing women in the legislature. In early 2025 Akpoti alleged that the Senate President sexually harassed her; the allegation sparked national debate about sexism in the legislature.^[37] Rather than an impartial investigation, the Senate’s ethics/privileges process treated the matter as procedural and recommended a six-month suspension for the senator on grounds of alleged misconduct (not for the harassment allegation itself).^[38] The episode provoked large-scale criticism from women’s groups and rights advocates, who argued that the Senate’s handling illustrated institutional bias and the precariousness of women who speak out. Akpoti challenged the suspension in court and filed civil proceedings

²⁹ Ajose O, ‘Women in the Nigeria’s National Assembly Historical Perspective (1999–2023)’ *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology* (2024) 9(10) <<https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/ijisrt24oct230>> accessed 10 April 2026.

³⁰ Agbalajobi DT and Oluwalogbon L, ‘The Nigerian Senate and the Politics of the Non-Passage of the Gender Equality Bill’ *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* (2019) 13(5) 141–150 <<https://doi.org/10.5897/ajpsir2019.1150>> accessed 10 April 2026.

³¹ OUP Accepted Manuscript ‘Parliamentary Affairs (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsac004> accessed 10 April 2026.

³² Olaoye G, Patricia Etteh: Nigeria’s Trailblazer (Historical Nigeria, 2025) <<https://historicalnigeria.com/patricia-etteh-nigerias-trailblazer/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ NaijaPolitics, Top South-West Politician: Senator Abiodun Christine Olujimi (n.d.) <<https://naijapolitics.ng/top-south-west-politician-senator-abiodun-christine-olujimi/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

³⁶ News Echo, ‘Uche Lilian Ekwunife: The Feisty Politician Anambra Needs’ (12 September 2025) <<https://www.newsecho.com.ng/politics/uche-lilian-ekwunife-the-feisty-politician-anambra-needs/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

³⁷ Premium Times, ‘UPDATED: Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan Reports Suspension, Sexual Harassment to Global Parliamentary Body’ (11 March 2025) <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/780097-updated-natasha-akpoti-uduaghan-reports-suspension-sexual-harassment-to-global-parliamentary-body-2.html>> accessed 10 April 2026.

³⁸ Ibid.

seeking damages.^[39] From her scenario, it can be seen that when a woman raises misconduct allegations against senior male colleagues, institutional responses may prioritize maintenance of internal order over substantive investigation, thereby discouraging other women from speaking up. Also, procedural rules and disciplinary mechanisms can be weaponised to silence dissenting women, and the severe scarcity of women in the Senate (only a handful of female senators) means there are too few colleagues to form protective coalitions leaving complainants vulnerable to isolation and reprisal.

12. Women in the Legislative Arm of Government in the United States of America

12.1. Legal and Constitutional Background:

The foundation for women's participation in the legislative process of the United States rests primarily on the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920. The amendment marked a historic turning point in American democracy, formally granting women the right to vote and thereby enabling them to participate fully in the political process, including standing for elective office. It provides that;

"The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."^[40]

This brief but powerful provision dismantled centuries of formal political exclusion and created the constitutional basis for women's enfranchisement across all states. The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment was the result of decades of persistent advocacy led by suffragists such as Susan B. Anthony,^[41] Elizabeth Cady Stanton,^[42] and later generations of women who mobilised through organisations like the National American Woman Suffrage Association. The amendment did not immediately translate into widespread political representation for women, however, systemic social, economic, and racial barriers continued to restrict their active political involvement. Nonetheless, it laid the groundwork for women to contest and occupy positions in state legislatures and eventually the United States Congress.

The next major constitutional and legal milestones that shaped women's inclusion in the political sphere were the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of sex, race, colour, religion, or national origin.^[43] This provision was a legal breakthrough that not only expanded women's access to professional and public service roles but also reinforced the principle of gender equality within institutions of governance. It contributed indirectly to the rise of women in politics by challenging the

structural norms that had confined them to domestic or subordinate public roles. Title VII encouraged women to seek positions in government, including legislative offices, and provided a legal avenue to contest discriminatory practices within political parties and public institutions.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 further strengthened the democratic participation of women, particularly women of colour, who had remained disenfranchised even after the Nineteenth Amendment.^[44] While the suffrage amendment formally guaranteed voting rights irrespective of sex, many African American women, especially in southern states, continued to face racial discrimination, literacy tests, and voter suppression tactics. The Voting Rights Act addressed these systemic barriers by outlawing discriminatory voting practices and empowering federal oversight in jurisdictions with histories of disenfranchisement. The Act thus expanded the practical scope of women's enfranchisement, ensuring that women of all races could exercise their constitutional right to vote and be voted for.^[45] It opened the political space for the emergence of African American women legislators such as Shirley Chisholm, who in 1968 became the first Black woman elected to the United States Congress.

Their combined effects became evident over the decades that followed. From the 1970s onward, the United States witnessed a steady rise in the number of women contesting elections, culminating in major milestones such as the election of Nancy Pelosi as the first female Speaker of the House of Representatives in 2007 and again in 2019,^[46] and the increasing number of women serving in both chambers of Congress. The legislative and constitutional foundations therefore not only secured women's suffrage but also laid the normative and institutional framework for gender inclusiveness in American democracy.

12.2. Empirical Data of Women Representatives in the US Legislature

Women's representation in the legislative arm of the United States government has evolved dramatically over the last century, though the progress has been gradual and uneven. One of the most defining moments in this trajectory was the 1992 election, famously termed the "Year of the Woman." The election concluded with Clinton winning decisively with 370 electoral votes against Bush's 168, while Perot garnered about 19% of the popular vote, marking him as a notable third-party candidate. Additionally, the elections saw an increase in female representation, earning 1992 the title of the "Year of the Woman." Overall, this election signified a transition in American politics, moving away from the conservative era of the previous twelve years.^[47] Following a series of highly publicised events, including the 1991 Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on the confirmation of

³⁹ Unini C, 'When Justice Derails: The Federal High Court's Judgment in Sen. Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan's Case and the Erosion of Judicial Discipline' (16 July 2025) <<https://thenigerialawyer.com/when-justice-derails-the-federal-high-courts-judgment-in-sen-natasha-akpoti-uduaghans-case-and-the-erosion-of-judicial-discipline/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁴⁰ Library of Congress, Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (n.d.) <<https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-19/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁴¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Susan B. Anthony (n.d.) <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Susan-B-Anthony>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁴² Encyclopaedia Britannica, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (n.d.) <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elizabeth-Cady-Stanton>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁴³ U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (n.d.) <<https://www.eeoc.gov/statutes/title-vii-civil-rights-act-1964>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁴⁴ Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Suffrage Syllabus: Unit 5, Week 1 (n.d.) <<https://long19.radcliffe.harvard.edu/teaching/suffrage-syllabus/unit-5/week-1/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Office of Nancy Pelosi, Biography (n.d.) <<https://pelosi.house.gov/biography>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁴⁷ EBSCO Research Starters, 1992 Elections in the United States (n.d.) <<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/1992-elections-united-states>> accessed 10 April 2026.

Justice Clarence Thomas and the testimony of Professor Anita Hill, public attention turned sharply toward issues of gender, equality, and representation.^[48] The hearings, widely perceived as mishandled by an all-male Senate panel, galvanised women across the nation to demand greater inclusion in political decision-making.

The results were historic in the 1992 elections, the number of women serving in Congress nearly doubled. The 103rd Congress (1993–1995) convened with 47 women legislators — 24 newly elected representatives in the House and six newly elected senators, bringing the total to forty-seven across both chambers.^[49] Prominent figures from this “Year of the Woman” cohort included Senators Dianne Feinstein, Barbara Boxer, Carol Moseley Braun (the first African American woman elected to the U.S. Senate), and Patty Murray, who would go on to hold senior leadership positions in subsequent years. The momentum of the early 1990s continued into the twenty-first century, with women’s participation in Congress expanding through successive elections, though not always steadily.^[50] By 2001, there were seventy-four women in the House and thirteen in the Senate. The 2006 elections saw Nancy Pelosi become the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House, a position she held for multiple terms, demonstrating the increasing institutional influence of women legislators.

In 2015, no state had achieved gender parity in either its senate or house chambers. The highest proportions of women in state senates were recorded in Arizona, Washington, and Montana, while Wyoming, West Virginia, and South Carolina had the lowest representation.^[51] In the state houses or assemblies, Colorado and Vermont led with the largest female presence, whereas Louisiana, Utah, and Oklahoma ranked among the least inclusive. Between 2004 and 2015, women’s share of senate seats grew in 27 states, with Montana showing the most significant progress, while Michigan saw the sharpest decline.^[52] Similarly, women’s representation in state houses or assemblies increased in 32 states, with New Jersey recording the greatest improvement, whereas Utah experienced the largest drop during the same period.

By 2023, the number of women in Congress reached a historic peak. According to data from the Congressional Research Service and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the 118th Congress (2023–2025) comprises 153 women — 124 in the House of Representatives and 29 in the Senate — representing approximately 28.5% of the entire legislative body. This figure marks the highest percentage of female legislators in U.S. history and underscores the gradual but meaningful transformation of political representation. The trend reflects not only the success of sustained advocacy efforts but also generational shifts in public perception and

party recruitment strategies that increasingly value gender diversity. Despite this progress, however, parity remains elusive. Women still constitute less than one-third of Congress, and disparities persist across party lines, racial identities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The Democratic Party continues to have a significantly higher number of female legislators than the Republican Party, with women making up nearly 42% of Democrats in Congress compared to less than 15% of Republicans as of 2023.^[53] Furthermore, women of colour — while increasingly visible — remain underrepresented relative to their share of the population.^[54] Nevertheless, the rising number of women in leadership roles, such as Vice President Kamala Harris, Senator Tammy Duckworth, and Representative Hakeem Jeffries’ deputy whip Katherine Clark, indicates a gradual reconfiguration of the legislative power structure.

Recent data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Congressional Research Service confirm that these legal milestones have produced lasting structural change. As of 2025, women occupy roughly 28% of seats in the U.S. Congress, the highest proportion in history.^[55] This outcome, while still short of parity, reflects the long-term impact of constitutional guarantees and civil rights legislation in broadening the representative character of American governance.

12.3. Notable Measures Facilitating Women’s Representation in the US

- The establishment of the National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC) in 1971 marked a significant institutional response to gender disparities in political participation in the US. It was founded during the women’s rights movement, the NWPC functions as a bipartisan organisation dedicated to increasing the number of women in elected and appointed offices at all levels of government. Through candidate training, campaign support and networking opportunities, it has systematically worked to dismantle structural barriers and promote feminist policy agendas.
- EMILY’s List, founded in 1985 by Ellen Malcolm, revolutionised women’s political fundraising and campaign viability. The organisation focuses on supporting pro-choice Democratic women by providing early financial backing based on the principle that “Early Money Is Like Yeast” because it helps a campaign grow.^[56] Beyond funding, EMILY’s List offers strategic guidance and access to donor networks, enabling women to compete effectively in the high-cost landscape of American elections.
- The creation of She Should Run in 2011 broadened the focus from campaign financing to leadership

⁴⁸ CBS News, Anita Hill vs Clarence Thomas: The Backstory (20 October 2010) <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/anita-hill-vs-clarence-thomas-the-backstory/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁴⁹ Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Women Decade (Long 19th Amendment Project, n.d.) <<https://long19.radcliffe.harvard.edu/teaching/suffrage-syllabus/unit-5/week-1/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Institute for Women’s Policy Research, Political Participation: Full Section (Status of Women in the States, n.d.) <<https://statusofwomendata.org/explore-the-data/political-participation/political-participation-full-section/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁵² Adewumi BA and Ipele LO, ‘Women in Parliament: An Analysis of the Gender Dimensions of Political Representation in Nigeria Under the Fourth Republic’ International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews (2024) 5(10) 2255–2259 <<https://ijrpr.com/uploads/V5ISSUE10/IJRPR34076.pdf>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Inter-Parliamentary Union, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (n.d.) <<https://www.ipu.org/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁵⁶ EMILY’s List, EMILY’s List (n.d.) <<https://emilyslist.org/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

development and mentorship.^[57] This initiative encourages women to perceive themselves as viable political leaders through training, mentorship and accessible educational programs. By fostering confidence and visibility, She Should Run plays a pivotal role in cultivating a steady pipeline of women leaders across party lines.

- Complementary efforts by organisations such as VoteRunLead and Emerge America have strengthened women's political engagement through comprehensive skill-building programs.^[58] These groups equip women with expertise in campaign strategy, communication, and policy advocacy, skills essential for success in competitive elections. Their contributions have been particularly impactful at the state level, where many women begin their political careers before advancing to federal positions.
- Additionally, media representation has emerged as an influential force in shaping public perceptions of women in leadership. Popular media portrayals such as Madam Secretary and Commander in Chief, alongside historic milestones like Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign and Kamala Harris's election as Vice President in 2020, have contributed to redefining political leadership as gender inclusive. This cultural shift complements institutional efforts by normalising female authority within the broader political discourse.

13. Comparative Analysis

13.1. Political Party Structures

The structure and internal democracy of political parties are central to women's representation. In the United States, the decentralised nature of party primaries promotes inclusiveness by allowing candidates to appeal directly to voters rather than rely on elite patronage. This system creates openings for women, especially when supported by advocacy groups and fundraising networks such as EMILY's List and She Should Run. While party structures still reflect broader social biases, the primary system and open contestation reduce the dominance of internal hierarchies and allow motivated women to build grassroots support. Moreover, both major parties, the Democrats and, increasingly, the Republicans, have established institutional mechanisms to recruit, train, and fund women candidates.

Nigeria's party system presents the opposite dynamic. Political parties operate under highly centralised and often opaque nomination processes dominated by "godfathers," powerful political elites who control access to candidacy.^[59] This culture of political gatekeeping, coupled with high financial requirements for party tickets, effectively excludes women, who typically have less access to wealth and patronage networks. The monetisation of politics has created structural barriers that privilege incumbents and wealthy male aspirants. Although the Independent National Electoral

Commission (INEC) mandates internal democracy, compliance remains weak, and party primaries frequently serve as mechanisms for elite consensus rather than voter-driven choice. As a result, women's candidacies are often tokenistic or relegated to lower offices, perpetuating male dominance in legislative positions.

13.2. Cultural and Societal Factors

Cultural and religious norms exert a powerful influence on women's political participation in both contexts, though with markedly different outcomes. In Nigeria, a deeply entrenched patriarchal culture continues to define leadership as a masculine enterprise.^[60] Religious conservatism, particularly in northern regions, reinforces gender hierarchies and limits women's public visibility.^[61] Societal expectations prioritise domestic roles over political engagement, and women who challenge these norms often face social sanctions, harassment, or character attacks. Studies have shown that even where women are politically active, they often lack community support or face gendered resistance from both voters and party structures.

In the United States, cultural evolution has been more progressive, though vestiges of gender bias remain. The feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, combined with civil rights activism, transformed societal attitudes toward gender equality and women's leadership. Media visibility, mentorship networks, and increasing normalization of women in high office, including the vice presidency, have collectively reshaped perceptions of political competence.

13.3. Findings

The divergent outcomes of women's representation in Nigeria and the United States are striking. As of the 2023 electoral cycle, women constitute less than 5% of Nigeria's National Assembly — 7 senators and 13 representatives out of a combined total of 469 seats. In contrast, the United States Congress, as of the 118th Congress (2023–2025), comprises 153 women, 124 in the House and 29 in the Senate, representing approximately 28.5% of total membership. This gap highlights fundamental differences in institutional design, enforcement of equality provisions, and the role of advocacy networks. The United States benefits from a long-standing tradition of civic activism, gender-focused political training, and accessible campaign financing for women. Nigeria, meanwhile, suffers from inconsistent institutional enforcement, high entry costs, weak political mentorship for women, and insufficient advocacy coordination.

Hence, the comparative analysis underscores that women's representation is not merely a function of democratic form but of institutional design and cultural context. Both Nigeria and the United States share constitutional commitments to equality and democratic governance, yet their outcomes diverge because of differences in how these ideals are operationalised. The U.S. system demonstrates that

⁵⁷ Connley C, 'She Should Run Plans to Get 250,000 Women to Run for Office by 2030' (29 July 2019) CNBC <<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/07/29/she-should-run-plans-to-get-250000-women-to-run-for-office-by-2030.html>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁵⁸ Vote Run Lead, Vote Run Lead (n.d.) <<https://voterunlead.org/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁵⁹ The Nigerian Inquirer, The Role of Political Parties in Nigeria's Democracy (8 November 2024) <<https://inquirer.ng/2024/11/08/the-role-of-political-parties-in-nigerias-democracy/>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁶⁰ Abdulyakeen A, 'The Politics of Gender Discrimination in Nigerian Fourth Republic: A Gender Analysis' *Acta Politica Polonica* (2022) 54(2) 21–34 <<https://doi.org/10.18276/ap.2022.54-02>> accessed 10 April 2026.

⁶¹ Maihula J, 'An Islamic Approach on Women in Public Life' *IAR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* (2020) 1(1) <<https://doi.org/10.47310/iarjhss.2020.v01i01.004>> accessed 10 April 2026.

enforceable legal protections, decentralised party structures, and active advocacy institutions create an ecosystem conducive to women's political success. Nigeria's experience reveals that constitutional declarations without binding enforcement, coupled with patriarchal political culture and monetised party systems, perpetuate exclusion.

The novelty of this comparative inquiry lies in its integrative model that connects *institutional design* (laws, party systems, and electoral mechanisms) with *cultural structure* (religion, patriarchy, and gender norms). This framework shows that democratic ideals alone do not guarantee inclusivity; rather, the interaction between institutional enforceability and cultural receptivity determines representational outcomes. In essence, the U.S. experience illustrates how democracy evolves through the reinforcement of equality mechanisms, while Nigeria's case highlights how democracy stagnates when constitutional ideals are decoupled from enforceable and culturally compatible institutions. This synthesis provides an analytical lens for future reforms, suggesting that meaningful gender parity in Nigeria requires not only legal reform but a recalibration of both political institutions and cultural attitudes toward leadership and gender.

13.4. Toward a Hybrid Reform Model

A key innovation emerging from this comparative perspective is the proposal of a *hybrid reform model* that integrates Nigeria's need for legal institutionalisation with the United States' experience of civic empowerment. This model would rest on three pillars:

- (1) legal reform, ensuring enforceable gender quotas or statutory obligations within Nigeria's electoral and party systems;
- (2) institutional capacity building, through the creation of women-focused political training academies, mentorship networks, and inclusive party primaries; and
- (3) civic reorientation, using education, media advocacy, and grassroots mobilisation to challenge patriarchal attitudes and normalise female political leadership.

The model assumes that sustainable gender parity arises when both *the rules of the game* and *the culture of participation* evolve in tandem. In practical terms, Nigeria could adapt aspects of the U.S. framework by enacting binding gender inclusion laws similar to Title IX enforcement and the Voting Rights Act's anti-discrimination mechanisms. Simultaneously, civil society and digital platforms should drive civic consciousness campaigns that reframe leadership as gender-neutral. The emphasis would shift from rhetorical advocacy to institutional accountability and participatory empowerment — ensuring that women are not only eligible but also electable.

14. Recommendations and Conclusion

14.1. Recommendations for Enhancing Women's Representation in the Legislative Arm of Government in Nigeria

- The Nigerian government should enact an enforceable 35 percent legislative gender quota to ensure women's equitable participation in both elective and appointive political positions, moving beyond the non-binding provisions of the National Gender Policy (2006).
- Political party constitutions should be reformed to institutionalise gender inclusivity, mandating a specific percentage of female candidates in party primaries and leadership structures.

- The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should integrate gender-sensitive guidelines into its electoral framework to guarantee fair access and participation for women aspirants.
- A Women Political Development Fund should be established and adequately financed to assist female candidates with campaign logistics, nomination fees, and voter outreach, addressing the financial barriers that often hinder women's political ambition.
- The government, through the Ministry of Women Affairs, should collaborate with development partners to promote comprehensive civic education programmes that raise awareness on gender equality and the importance of women in governance.
- National and sub-national assemblies should create Women's Parliamentary Caucuses with legislative authority to advocate for gender-sensitive laws and monitor compliance across political institutions.
- Civil society organisations should be empowered to monitor and report gender representation progress, ensuring transparency and public accountability in the implementation of gender policies.
- Mentorship and leadership development programmes should be institutionalised within political parties and universities to build the capacity of emerging female leaders and prepare them for effective legislative engagement.
- The media should be mobilised to promote positive narratives about women in politics, challenging stereotypes and highlighting success stories to inspire broader participation.
- Nigeria should strengthen its data collection systems through the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and INEC to provide reliable gender-disaggregated data for research, monitoring, and policy development.
- Electoral security reforms should be introduced to curb violence, intimidation, and harassment during elections, as these factors disproportionately affect female candidates and voters.

15. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that having good laws is not enough to ensure women's full participation in politics. What truly makes the difference is the presence of political will, supportive institutions, and a society open to change. The United States demonstrates how civic engagement, advocacy, and inclusive party systems can turn equality on paper into reality. Nigeria can learn from this by combining legal reforms with stronger civic education and mentorship for women. True democracy thrives when both men and women share in decision-making, and genuine inclusion will ultimately make Nigeria's democratic system stronger, fairer, and more representative of its people.

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