



WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND NIGERIA'S INTERNATIONAL STANDING: AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Tumba Ardo

Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social and Management Sciences, Sokoto State University,
Sokoto, Nigeria.



Corresponding Author's Email: tumbaardo@yahoo.com

Abstract

Women's political representation has become a critical indicator of democratic quality, institutional legitimacy, and international credibility. While existing scholarship has extensively examined the barriers limiting women's political participation in Nigeria, comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how women's representation influences the country's international standing and broader governance outcomes. This study examines the relationship between women's political representation and Nigeria's international standing by assessing the diplomatic and developmental implications of gender inclusion through the analytical lens of Feminist Institutionalism. Adopting a qualitative documentary research design, the study draws upon peer-reviewed literature, official government publications, reports of international organizations, and electoral data obtained from institutions including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), UN Women, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank, and the African Union (AU). Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify institutional patterns linking women's political participation with democratic governance, diplomacy, and sustainable development. The findings demonstrate that despite Nigeria's extensive formal commitments to gender equality, deeply embedded informal political institutions, including patriarchal norms, patronage networks, gendered party structures, and unequal access to political resources, continue to constrain women's effective participation in political leadership. The study further reveals that women's political representation contributes significantly to democratic legitimacy, enhances Nigeria's diplomatic credibility and international standing, and supports sustainable development through improved policy responsiveness. The study concludes that strengthening women's political representation should be regarded not only as a democratic obligation but also as a strategic institutional investment capable of enhancing Nigeria's governance capacity, international legitimacy, and long-term development.

Keywords: *Women's political representation; Feminist Institutionalism; Democratic legitimacy; International standing; Sustainable development; Nigeria.*

Introduction

Over the past three decades, women's political representation has become an increasingly important indicator of democratic quality, institutional legitimacy, and good governance. Across both developed and developing democracies, the inclusion of women in political decision-making is now regarded as an essential component of representative democracy rather than merely a question of social justice or electoral fairness (Paxton, Hughes, & Barnes, 2020). International organizations, regional bodies, and development partners increasingly evaluate states not only on the conduct of elections but also on the inclusiveness of their political institutions and the extent to which diverse



social groups participate in public decision-making (United Nations, 2015; UN Women, 2023). Consequently, women's political representation has acquired significance beyond domestic politics, becoming an important indicator of democratic legitimacy, governance quality, and international credibility.

The growing international emphasis on gender-inclusive governance is reflected in numerous global and regional normative frameworks. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the African Union's Agenda 2063, and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa collectively encourage states to eliminate barriers to women's political participation and promote equitable representation within public institutions (African Union, 2015; United Nations, 2015). These frameworks increasingly position women's political inclusion as a governance imperative linked to democratic consolidation, institutional accountability, sustainable development, and international legitimacy.

The relationship between women's political representation and international standing has attracted growing scholarly attention. Contemporary research suggests that states demonstrating greater political inclusion often enjoy stronger democratic reputations, enhanced diplomatic credibility, and increased normative influence within regional and international organizations (Aggestam & Towns, 2019; Nye, 2004). Inclusive political institutions strengthen democratic legitimacy by reflecting the diversity of society while simultaneously reinforcing external perceptions of governments' commitment to democratic values, human rights, and good governance. Gender inclusion therefore contributes not only to domestic political development but also to the soft power resources through which states cultivate influence within the international system.

Despite these global developments, women's political representation remains uneven across many developing democracies. While several African countries, including Rwanda, Namibia, Senegal, and South Africa, have implemented institutional reforms that substantially increased women's representation in political leadership, Nigeria continues to record one of the lowest levels of female political representation on the continent despite its constitutional commitment to equality and its extensive participation in international and regional gender initiatives (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2024). Women's representation in Nigeria's National Assembly, executive institutions, and elective offices remains considerably below internationally recommended benchmarks, raising important questions regarding the institutional factors sustaining gender disparities and the broader implications for democratic governance and international engagement.

Existing scholarship has examined numerous explanations for women's underrepresentation in Nigerian politics, including patriarchal political culture, discriminatory party structures, limited financial resources, electoral violence, political clientelism, weak implementation of affirmative action policies, and socio-cultural constraints (Krook, 2010; Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010; Ogbogu, 2012; Okeke, 2014). While these studies have significantly advanced understanding of the institutional barriers confronting women, the literature has largely concentrated on explaining why women remain underrepresented rather than examining the broader consequences of this underrepresentation for Nigeria's international standing. In particular, relatively limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the ways in which gender inclusion influences diplomatic credibility, international legitimacy, governance reputation, and development partnerships within an increasingly interconnected global political environment.



This gap has become increasingly important as international governance norms place greater emphasis on inclusive political institutions as indicators of democratic quality and state legitimacy. Contemporary diplomacy extends beyond traditional interstate relations to encompass the projection of domestic governance values, institutional performance, and adherence to internationally accepted democratic principles. Consequently, persistent gender disparities within political leadership may influence external assessments of Nigeria's democratic credentials and shape the country's capacity to exercise normative leadership within regional and global governance institutions.

Against this background, this study examines the relationship between women's political representation and Nigeria's international standing by assessing the diplomatic and developmental implications of gender inclusion. Guided by Feminist Institutionalism, the study investigates how formal political institutions and informal political practices interact to shape women's political participation and how these institutional dynamics influence democratic legitimacy, diplomatic credibility, and sustainable development. By linking domestic political representation with international governance outcomes, the study contributes to the growing literature connecting gender, institutions, democracy, and international relations. It further extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that women's political representation should be understood not only as an issue of democratic inclusion but also as a strategic institutional resource with important implications for Nigeria's governance profile and international standing.

Literature Review

Women's Political Representation and Democratic Governance

Women's political representation has become a central theme in contemporary scholarship on democratic governance. The expansion of representative democracy has increasingly been accompanied by demands for more inclusive political institutions that reflect the diversity of society. Early normative scholars argued that democratic legitimacy depends not only on the conduct of competitive elections but also on the equitable representation of different social groups within political decision-making processes (Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999). From this perspective, women's political inclusion enhances the representativeness of democratic institutions by ensuring that political decision-making reflects the experiences and interests of both men and women.

The distinction between descriptive and substantive representation has significantly shaped debates on women's political participation. Descriptive representation focuses on the numerical presence of women within elected institutions, whereas substantive representation concerns the extent to which women influence public policy and legislative outcomes affecting broader societal interests (Pitkin, 1967; Childs & Lovenduski, 2013). Although increasing the number of women in political office does not automatically guarantee gender-responsive policymaking, numerous studies suggest that greater female representation contributes to broader policy debates, improved legislative responsiveness, and increased attention to issues such as education, healthcare, social protection, and gender equality (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008; Swers, 2002).

Comparative studies further demonstrate that countries with higher levels of women's political representation frequently exhibit stronger democratic institutions and greater public confidence in governance. Paxton, Hughes, and Barnes (2020) argue that inclusive political institutions strengthen democratic legitimacy by expanding participation and reducing the perception of political exclusion. Similarly, Norris (2012) contends that representative institutions deriving legitimacy from broad social inclusion are generally more accountable, responsive, and resilient than systems characterized by persistent exclusion. These findings suggest that women's political representation should be



understood not merely as a measure of electoral fairness but as an important indicator of democratic quality and institutional effectiveness.

Nevertheless, scholars caution against assuming a direct causal relationship between numerical representation and democratic performance. Krook (2010) argues that increasing women's representation without addressing the institutional barriers embedded within political parties, electoral systems, and legislative procedures may produce symbolic rather than substantive inclusion. Likewise, Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2010) maintain that meaningful political inclusion requires institutional transformation rather than simply increasing the number of women occupying political office. Consequently, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes institutional reform as the foundation for achieving sustainable gender inclusion.

Gender Inclusion and International Standing

Beyond its domestic democratic significance, women's political representation has become increasingly relevant to discussions of international legitimacy and diplomatic influence. Global governance institutions now regard gender equality as an important indicator of democratic governance, institutional accountability, and adherence to international human rights norms (United Nations, 2015; UN Women, 2023). Consequently, women's political participation increasingly shapes how states are perceived within regional and international organizations.

The concept of international standing extends beyond military capability or economic performance to include a state's reputation for responsible governance, democratic practice, and normative leadership. Nye (2004) argues that soft power increasingly derives from the attractiveness of domestic political values and institutional performance rather than coercive capabilities alone. States that demonstrate commitment to inclusive governance often enjoy greater diplomatic credibility, enhanced moral authority, and stronger capacity to influence international policy agendas.

Recent scholarship further links gender inclusion to contemporary diplomatic practice. Aggestam and Towns (2019) observe that gender equality has become an increasingly important component of foreign policy and international diplomacy, particularly as governments seek to project democratic values within multilateral institutions. Similarly, Thompson and Clement (2019) argue that gender-inclusive governance strengthens international partnerships by signaling commitment to equality, accountability, and sustainable development. Within this context, women's political representation contributes to the construction of international legitimacy by reinforcing perceptions of democratic maturity and institutional credibility.

Despite these developments, empirical research examining the relationship between women's political representation and international standing remains relatively limited, particularly in African contexts. Existing studies have largely focused on feminist foreign policy, gender mainstreaming, or international development while paying comparatively little attention to how domestic political representation influences broader diplomatic reputation. This represents an important gap within the literature.

Women's Political Representation and Sustainable Development

The relationship between gender inclusion and development has received increasing scholarly attention over the past two decades. Development scholars increasingly recognize inclusive governance as a prerequisite for sustainable social, economic, and political development. Sen (1999) argues that development should be understood as the expansion of human freedoms, including equal



opportunities for political participation. From this perspective, women's political representation constitutes both a development objective and a mechanism for improving governance outcomes.

International organizations similarly emphasize the developmental significance of gender-inclusive institutions. The World Bank (2012) identifies women's political participation as an important contributor to institutional effectiveness, policy responsiveness, and economic development, while the United Nations Development Programme (2023) highlights inclusive governance as a critical dimension of human development. Sustainable Development Goal 5 explicitly calls for women's full and effective participation at all levels of political decision-making, recognizing that inclusive institutions strengthen accountability and improve development outcomes (United Nations, 2015).

Empirical studies provide additional support for these arguments. Research suggests that increased female representation often contributes to greater legislative attention to education, healthcare, child welfare, poverty reduction, and social protection policies (Paxton et al., 2020; Swers, 2002). However, scholars also acknowledge that these outcomes depend upon broader institutional conditions. Where political systems remain characterized by entrenched patronage, weak party democracy, and discriminatory political norms, women's capacity to influence policy may remain constrained despite improvements in descriptive representation (Krook, 2010; Waylen, 2014).

Empirical Studies and Research Gap

Empirical studies on women's political representation in Nigeria have predominantly concentrated on identifying the barriers limiting women's access to political office. Common explanations include patriarchal social norms, financial constraints, political violence, discriminatory party nomination procedures, and weak implementation of affirmative action policies (Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2003; Ogbogu, 2012; Okeke, 2014). Although these studies provide valuable insights into the structural and institutional obstacles confronting women, they remain largely focused on the determinants of political exclusion.

Comparative African scholarship similarly emphasizes electoral quotas, institutional reforms, and political party structures as the principal explanations for variations in women's political representation across countries (Krook, 2010; Paxton et al., 2020). Considerably less attention has been devoted to examining how gender inclusion influences broader dimensions of state legitimacy, diplomatic credibility, and international development.

Accordingly, an important gap remains within the existing literature. While previous studies have examined why women remain underrepresented in Nigerian politics, few have systematically investigated the implications of this underrepresentation for Nigeria's international standing. Moreover, existing research rarely integrates democratic governance, diplomacy, and development within a single analytical framework. By examining the diplomatic and developmental implications of women's political representation through the lens of Feminist Institutionalism, this study addresses this gap and contributes a more integrated understanding of the relationship between domestic political inclusion and international legitimacy.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Institutionalism

This study adopts Feminist Institutionalism (FI) as its analytical framework to explain how institutional arrangements influence women's political representation and, by extension, shape Nigeria's democratic legitimacy, diplomatic credibility, and international standing. Feminist Institutionalism emerged from the broader tradition of New Institutionalism, which examines how formal rules, organizational structures, and institutional norms shape political behavior and policy



outcomes (Hall & Taylor, 1996). While traditional institutional approaches emphasize the operation of political institutions, Feminist Institutionalism extends this perspective by demonstrating that institutions are inherently gendered and that both formal and informal rules influence access to political power (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010).

The central proposition of Feminist Institutionalism is that political institutions are not gender-neutral. Rather, they are historically constructed through formal constitutional arrangements and informal social norms that often privilege existing power structures while reproducing gender inequalities (Krook & Mackay, 2011). Consequently, women's underrepresentation in political leadership cannot be explained solely by individual choices or electoral competition; it is fundamentally shaped by institutional arrangements governing political recruitment, candidate selection, leadership succession, resource distribution, and political participation.

A major contribution of Feminist Institutionalism lies in its distinction between formal institutions and informal institutions. Formal institutions include constitutions, electoral laws, political party constitutions, legislative procedures, and public policies that regulate political participation. In Nigeria, these formal arrangements generally guarantee equal political rights and prohibit discrimination based on gender. Constitutional provisions, electoral legislation, and the National Gender Policy all provide legal foundations supporting women's political participation.

However, Feminist Institutionalism argues that formal legal equality alone rarely produces substantive political inclusion because political outcomes are equally shaped by informal institutions. Informal institutions consist of unwritten rules, social expectations, cultural practices, patronage networks, and organizational norms that influence political behavior outside formal legal structures (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). Within the Nigerian political context, patriarchal cultural values, male-dominated party leadership, clientelist political networks, monetized electoral competition, political violence, and gender stereotypes frequently constrain women's opportunities to compete for and occupy elective office despite constitutional guarantees of equality.

This interaction between formal and informal institutions is particularly important for understanding Nigeria's persistent gender gap in political representation. Although successive governments have endorsed international commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the African Union's Agenda 2063, implementation has remained constrained by institutional practices that continue to privilege established political elites. Feminist Institutionalism therefore provides a useful explanation for why legal commitments to gender equality have produced only modest improvements in women's representation.

Beyond explaining women's political participation, the theory also provides important insights into the broader implications of institutional inclusion. Contemporary governance scholarship increasingly recognizes that the legitimacy of democratic institutions depends upon their capacity to represent the diversity of society. Political systems characterized by persistent exclusion may experience reduced public trust, weaker democratic legitimacy, and diminished international credibility. Consequently, institutional barriers limiting women's political representation have implications that extend beyond domestic electoral politics to influence external assessments of democratic governance and adherence to internationally accepted norms of inclusion and equality.

Within this study, Feminist Institutionalism provides an analytical framework for examining how institutional arrangements shape both political representation and international perceptions of governance. The theory facilitates an integrated analysis of the relationship between formal legal



commitments, informal political practices, women's participation in political leadership, and Nigeria's international standing. Rather than treating women's underrepresentation solely as a question of electoral outcomes, the framework conceptualizes gender inclusion as an institutional process with important consequences for democratic legitimacy, diplomatic reputation, and sustainable development.

Accordingly, the study argues that improving women's political representation requires more than constitutional guarantees or affirmative policy commitments. Sustainable progress depends upon institutional reforms capable of transforming both the formal rules and the informal practices that structure political competition. From the perspective of Feminist Institutionalism, strengthening gender-inclusive institutions not only promotes democratic equality but also enhances institutional legitimacy, governance effectiveness, and Nigeria's capacity to project itself as a credible democratic actor within regional and global governance systems.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the relationship between women's political representation and Nigeria's international standing by assessing the diplomatic and developmental implications of gender inclusion. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate because the study seeks to understand institutional processes, governance dynamics, and the broader implications of women's political participation rather than establish statistical relationships between variables. Qualitative research facilitates an in-depth exploration of complex political phenomena by allowing researchers to interpret meanings, institutional practices, and policy processes within their social and political contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study adopted a documentary research strategy based on the systematic analysis of secondary data obtained from academic literature, official government publications, and reports of international organizations, policy documents, and electoral statistics. Documentary analysis is particularly suitable for studies that investigate public policy, governance, and institutional development because it enables the examination of existing evidence generated by credible institutions while facilitating historical and comparative analysis (Bowen, 2009).

Data Sources and Selection Criteria: The documentary sources consulted included reports from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), UN Women, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank, the African Union (AU), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Economic Forum (WEF), and other reputable national and international institutions. These sources were complemented by peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and official policy documents relating to gender inclusion, democratic governance, diplomacy, and sustainable development. Documents were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, authority of the issuing institution, and currency of the information provided. Priority was given to official statistical publications, peer-reviewed academic literature, and reports from internationally recognized organizations.

Data Analysis: Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. This analytical technique allows for the systematic identification, interpretation, and comparison of recurring themes, concepts, and institutional patterns within documentary evidence (Schreier, 2012). The analytical process proceeded through several stages. First, all documents were carefully reviewed to gain an overall understanding of their content. Second, documents were coded according to themes derived from the study's objectives and theoretical framework, including institutional barriers to women's



political representation, democratic legitimacy, diplomatic credibility, governance quality, sustainable development, and international standing. A detailed coding scheme was developed, organized around four main analytical categories: (1) Formal Institutions (sub-codes: constitutional provisions, legal frameworks, policy commitments); (2) Informal Institutions (sub-codes: patronage networks, cultural norms, party dynamics); (3) Women's Political Representation (sub-codes: descriptive representation, substantive representation, institutional barriers); and (4) Governance Outcomes (sub-codes: democratic legitimacy, international standing, policy outcomes, sustainable development). The coding process facilitated the identification of relationships between institutional arrangements and broader governance outcomes while ensuring consistency in data interpretation.

Theoretical Framework: The study was guided by Feminist Institutionalism, which provided the analytical framework for interpreting the documentary evidence. Rather than treating documents as isolated sources of information, the analysis examined how formal institutional arrangements, informal political practices, and broader governance structures interact to influence women's political representation and shape Nigeria's international reputation. The theoretical framework therefore informed both the organization of the data and the interpretation of the findings.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, evidence was triangulated across multiple documentary sources. Academic publications were compared with official government reports, international organizational databases, and policy documents to ensure consistency and reduce the risk of relying on a single source of evidence. Where differences emerged among sources, greater weight was assigned to official statistical publications and peer-reviewed academic literature. This process strengthened the reliability of the findings while improving the overall validity of the analysis.

Because the study relied exclusively on publicly available documentary materials, no direct interaction with human participants was involved. Consequently, issues relating to informed consent and participant confidentiality did not arise. Nevertheless, the study adhered to established principles of academic integrity by ensuring accurate citation of all sources, faithful representation of published evidence, and objective interpretation of documentary materials. Every effort was made to minimize researcher bias through systematic data coding, critical comparison of sources, and transparent analytical procedures.

Although documentary analysis provides a robust basis for examining institutional processes and governance trends, the study acknowledges certain limitations. Documentary evidence reflects the quality and availability of existing publications and official statistics and may not fully capture informal political practices or emerging developments that have not yet been documented. Furthermore, the study focuses on Nigeria and therefore does not seek to provide statistical generalizations for all African states. Nevertheless, by integrating evidence from multiple authoritative sources and interpreting the findings through Feminist Institutionalism, the study provides a rigorous and analytically grounded assessment of the relationship between women's political representation and Nigeria's international standing.

Analysis and Discussion

Institutional Barriers and Women's Political Representation in Nigeria

Despite Nigeria's constitutional commitment to equality and its ratification of numerous international and regional instruments promoting women's political participation, the country's level of female political representation remains remarkably low. Official parliamentary statistics indicate that



women currently occupy only a small proportion of seats in both chambers of the National Assembly, placing Nigeria among the lowest-performing countries in Africa with respect to women's parliamentary representation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024; UN Women, 2024). In the 2023 elections, women won only 4.7% of seats in the House of Representatives and 3.5% in the Senate, figures that compare unfavorably with Rwanda's 61.3% and South Africa's 45.4% (IPU, 2024). This persistent underrepresentation demonstrates that formal legal guarantees have not translated into substantive political inclusion.

From the perspective of Feminist Institutionalism, this outcome reflects the interaction between formal institutional arrangements and deeply embedded informal political practices. Formally, Nigeria's Constitution guarantees equal political rights and prohibits discrimination based on sex. In addition, successive governments have endorsed major international commitments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the African Union's Agenda 2063, all of which encourage greater women's participation in political leadership. These formal commitments suggest that the legal foundations for gender-inclusive governance already exist.

However, the empirical evidence indicates that formal equality has been insufficient to overcome institutional barriers embedded within Nigeria's political system. Political party nomination processes remain highly centralized and are frequently influenced by informal patronage networks that favor established male political elites. Candidate selection often depends upon personal political connections, financial resources, and long-standing elite alliances, factors that disproportionately disadvantage women seeking elective office. Consequently, political competition continues to operate within institutional environments that reproduce rather than reduce gender inequalities.

Financial barriers further reinforce these institutional constraints. Electoral competition in Nigeria requires substantial financial resources to secure party nominations, sustain campaigns, mobilize supporters, and maintain political visibility. The monetization of electoral politics places women at a structural disadvantage because they generally possess more limited access to political financing and elite patronage networks than their male counterparts. As Feminist Institutionalism argues, unequal access to institutional resources represents an important mechanism through which apparently neutral political institutions generate unequal outcomes (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010).

The analysis also demonstrates the continuing influence of informal institutions in shaping political participation. Patriarchal social norms, traditional gender expectations, and cultural perceptions regarding political leadership continue to influence voter behavior, party decision-making, and candidate recruitment. Although these informal rules are not codified within constitutional or electoral legislation, they significantly affect women's opportunities to compete successfully for political office. Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) distinction between formal and informal institutions is particularly instructive here, as it illustrates how unwritten norms frequently modify or undermine the intended effects of formal institutional reforms.

Electoral violence and political insecurity constitute an additional institutional barrier. Nigerian elections have historically been characterized by intense political competition, intimidation, and, in some instances, violence. Such conditions discourage political participation generally but often affect women more severely because female candidates frequently encounter gender-specific threats, harassment, and discriminatory treatment during electoral campaigns. Consequently, political participation is shaped not only by constitutional rights but also by the broader institutional environment within which electoral competition occurs.



Comparative African evidence further demonstrates that low women's representation is not an inevitable feature of African politics but rather the product of differing institutional arrangements. Countries such as Rwanda, South Africa, Namibia, and Senegal have adopted various combinations of constitutional reforms, legislative quotas, or political party quota systems that have significantly increased women's representation within national legislatures. Their experiences suggest that sustained institutional reform, rather than demographic or cultural differences alone, largely explains cross-national variation in women's political inclusion.

The findings therefore support the central proposition of Feminist Institutionalism that institutional outcomes are shaped by the interaction between formal rules and informal political practices. While Nigeria possesses an extensive legal framework supporting gender equality, informal institutional constraints continue to limit women's effective access to political leadership. The persistence of these institutional barriers explains why international commitments have produced only modest improvements in women's political representation. Accordingly, increasing women's participation requires reforms that address both constitutional arrangements and the informal political norms governing candidate recruitment, party leadership, campaign financing, and political competition.

Women's Political Representation and Democratic Legitimacy

Democratic legitimacy derives not only from the existence of competitive elections but also from the extent to which political institutions reflect the diversity and interests of the populations they govern. Contemporary democratic theory increasingly recognizes political inclusion as a fundamental indicator of institutional legitimacy because representative institutions derive greater public confidence when they provide meaningful opportunities for all social groups to participate in political decision-making (Norris, 2012; Phillips, 1995). Within this context, women's political representation extends beyond questions of numerical equality to encompass broader issues of democratic accountability, institutional responsiveness, and political legitimacy.

The findings of this study indicate that Nigeria's persistently low level of women's political representation raises important concerns regarding the inclusiveness of its democratic institutions. Although women constitute approximately half of the country's population and play significant roles in economic production, community development, and civil society, their participation in legislative and executive decision-making remains disproportionately limited. This imbalance weakens the representative character of democratic institutions by excluding a substantial proportion of society from meaningful participation in political leadership.

From the perspective of Feminist Institutionalism, democratic legitimacy is shaped by the interaction between institutional design and institutional practice. Formal constitutional guarantees may establish equal political rights, yet democratic legitimacy depends upon whether institutional arrangements enable citizens to exercise those rights effectively. The Nigerian experience demonstrates that the existence of constitutional protections alone does not ensure inclusive governance where informal political institutions continue to constrain women's access to leadership positions. Consequently, institutional legitimacy cannot be assessed solely through legal frameworks but must also consider the practical outcomes produced by those institutions.

The empirical evidence further suggests that limited women's representation influences the quality of public policymaking. Numerous comparative studies have demonstrated that increased female participation in legislative institutions often broadens policy deliberation by incorporating perspectives that have historically received limited political attention, particularly in areas relating to education, healthcare, social welfare, gender equality, and family policy (Swers, 2002; Franceschet



& Piscopo, 2008; Paxton, Hughes, & Barnes, 2020). While female legislators do not constitute a homogeneous political group, greater gender diversity generally enhances the capacity of representative institutions to address a wider range of societal concerns. The continued underrepresentation of women therefore limits the diversity of perspectives informing national policy formulation.

Institutional exclusion also affects public confidence in democratic governance. Representative institutions derive legitimacy from citizens' perceptions that political opportunities are distributed fairly and that public offices remain accessible to all qualified individuals regardless of gender. Persistent structural barriers limiting women's political participation may reinforce public perceptions that political competition is dominated by entrenched elite networks rather than merit based democratic competition. Such perceptions have broader implications for institutional trust, political participation, and democratic consolidation.

Comparative African experiences provide further insight into the relationship between gender inclusion and democratic legitimacy. Countries such as Rwanda, South Africa, Namibia, and Senegal have implemented institutional reforms that substantially increased women's political representation through constitutional provisions, legislative quotas, or political party quota systems. Although these reforms have not eliminated all dimensions of gender inequality, they have strengthened the representative character of political institutions by broadening participation and improving the inclusiveness of legislative decision-making. Their experiences demonstrate that institutional reforms can enhance democratic legitimacy by expanding opportunities for historically underrepresented groups without undermining democratic competition.

The findings of this study therefore reinforce the central proposition of Feminist Institutionalism that inclusive political institutions are fundamental to democratic legitimacy. Women's political underrepresentation in Nigeria should not be interpreted solely as a gender imbalance but as evidence of broader institutional limitations affecting democratic representation. Addressing these limitations requires reforms that extend beyond increasing the number of women occupying political office to transforming the formal and informal institutional arrangements governing political recruitment, party leadership, campaign financing, and legislative participation. Strengthening women's political representation is therefore integral to improving democratic legitimacy and consolidating representative governance within Nigeria.

Gender Inclusion, Diplomacy, and Nigeria's International Standing

In contemporary international relations, a state's international standing is increasingly shaped not only by its economic performance and military capabilities but also by the quality of its domestic governance institutions. Democratic accountability, respect for human rights, adherence to the rule of law, and inclusive political participation have become important indicators through which states are evaluated within regional and global governance systems (Nye, 2004; United Nations, 2015). Consequently, women's political representation has evolved from being viewed solely as a domestic governance issue to becoming an important dimension of international legitimacy and diplomatic credibility.

The findings of this study indicate that Nigeria's persistently low level of women's political representation has implications that extend beyond national politics. Despite being Africa's most populous country, one of its largest economies, and an influential actor within the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the United Nations (UN), Nigeria continues to record one of the lowest levels of female parliamentary representation on the



continent (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). This disparity creates a contradiction between Nigeria's regional leadership aspirations and its domestic record on political inclusion, potentially affecting external perceptions of its commitment to democratic governance and gender equality.

From the perspective of Feminist Institutionalism, international standing is influenced by the institutional credibility that states project through their domestic political arrangements. Institutions that consistently exclude significant segments of society weaken perceptions of democratic legitimacy because they suggest that formal guarantees of equality are not fully translated into political practice. Nigeria's constitutional commitment to equal political participation, together with its ratification of international gender equality instruments, demonstrates a strong normative framework. However, the persistence of institutional barriers limiting women's representation may reduce the credibility of these commitments in the eyes of international partners, development agencies, and multilateral organizations.

The relationship between gender inclusion and diplomatic credibility has become increasingly evident within contemporary international diplomacy. Aggestam and Towns (2019) argue that gender equality has emerged as an important component of international engagement, with many governments integrating gender considerations into foreign policy, development cooperation, peacebuilding, and international negotiations. States that demonstrate measurable progress toward inclusive governance frequently enjoy greater normative influence within multilateral institutions because their domestic practices reinforce the democratic values they advocate internationally. Conversely, limited progress on gender inclusion may constrain a state's ability to exercise moral leadership on issues relating to democracy, human rights, and inclusive governance.

The findings further suggest that women's political representation contributes to a country's soft power resources. Nye (2004) conceptualizes soft power as the ability of states to influence others through attraction, legitimacy, and the credibility of their political values rather than through coercion or material incentives. Inclusive political institutions enhance this attractiveness by signaling openness, accountability, and democratic maturity. Consequently, expanding women's participation in political leadership should be viewed not merely as a domestic governance reform but also as an investment in Nigeria's international reputation and diplomatic influence.

Evidence from comparative African experiences reinforces this argument. Rwanda's sustained commitment to increasing women's political representation has strengthened its international reputation as a leader in gender inclusion and democratic reform, despite continuing debates regarding other dimensions of governance. Similarly, countries such as Namibia and South Africa have utilized gender-inclusive political institutions to reinforce their democratic credentials and strengthen engagement with international development partners. These experiences suggest that institutional commitment to gender equality can enhance a state's international profile by demonstrating alignment with globally accepted governance norms.

The analysis also indicates that gender inclusion influences relationships with international development institutions. Development agencies, multilateral financial organizations, and bilateral partners increasingly incorporate governance indicators, including political inclusion and gender equality, into their assessments of institutional performance. Although development cooperation is shaped by multiple strategic considerations, countries demonstrating stronger commitments to inclusive governance often possess greater opportunities to mobilize international partnerships, attract technical assistance, and strengthen cooperation in governance-related programs. Nigeria's limited progress in women's political representation may therefore affect not only its normative standing but also aspects of its broader international engagement.



The findings consequently extend existing scholarship by demonstrating that women's political representation constitutes an important dimension of statecraft within contemporary international relations. Rather than viewing gender inclusion exclusively through the lens of domestic democratic reform, the evidence suggests that inclusive political institutions contribute to the construction of international legitimacy, diplomatic credibility, and soft power. From the perspective of Feminist Institutionalism, institutional reforms promoting women's political participation therefore generate benefits that extend beyond electoral politics to influence how states are perceived, trusted, and engaged within the international system. Strengthening women's political representation should accordingly be understood as both a democratic imperative and a strategic investment in Nigeria's international standing.

Women's Political Representation and Sustainable Development

The relationship between women's political representation and sustainable development has received increasing attention within contemporary governance scholarship. Sustainable development extends beyond economic growth to encompass inclusive institutions, equitable access to opportunities, social justice, and effective governance capable of improving citizens' quality of life (Sen, 1999; United Nations, 2015). Within this broader understanding, women's participation in political decision-making represents both a development objective and an institutional mechanism through which governments enhance policy effectiveness, accountability, and long-term development outcomes.

The findings of this study indicate that Nigeria's limited representation of women in political leadership has implications that extend beyond democratic inclusion to influence the country's broader development trajectory. Although women constitute a substantial proportion of Nigeria's population and make significant contributions to agriculture, entrepreneurship, education, healthcare, and the informal economy, their limited presence within legislative and executive institutions restricts the diversity of perspectives informing national development policies. Consequently, important social and economic priorities affecting large segments of the population may receive insufficient political attention during policy formulation and resource allocation.

From the perspective of Feminist Institutionalism, this outcome reflects institutional arrangements that constrain the effective utilization of human capital. Political institutions serve as mechanisms through which societal interests are aggregated, negotiated, and translated into public policy. Where institutional structures systematically limit the participation of particular social groups, governments risk overlooking valuable knowledge, experiences, and policy perspectives that could improve governance outcomes. Accordingly, women's underrepresentation should be understood not only as a democratic deficit but also as an institutional limitation affecting the quality and inclusiveness of national development planning.

Empirical evidence from comparative studies supports this interpretation. Research consistently demonstrates that increased women's representation within legislative institutions is associated with greater policy attention to education, public health, maternal welfare, child protection, social security, and community development (Swers, 2002; Paxton, Hughes, & Barnes, 2020). For instance, studies have found that Indian state governments with higher female representation allocated more resources to drinking water, sanitation, and infrastructure that benefited women and children (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Similarly, research from Latin America indicates that female legislators are more likely to sponsor bills on childcare, health, and social protection (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008). While policy outcomes are shaped by multiple political and economic factors, broader gender inclusion frequently contributes to more comprehensive policy deliberations by



incorporating perspectives that have historically been underrepresented in political decision-making. Inclusive institutions therefore strengthen governments' capacity to formulate policies that address the needs of wider sections of society.

The developmental significance of women's political representation is further reflected in international policy frameworks. Sustainable Development Goal 5 explicitly calls for women's full and effective participation in political leadership, recognizing that gender equality is both a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for achieving the broader Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). Similarly, the World Bank (2012) and the United Nations Development Programme (2023) identify inclusive governance as an essential component of sustainable development because representative institutions generally exhibit greater responsiveness, accountability, and policy effectiveness.

The findings also suggest that improving women's political representation can strengthen institutional resilience by broadening participation within governance processes. Political systems that incorporate diverse social perspectives are generally better positioned to anticipate emerging societal challenges, formulate balanced public policies, and promote social cohesion. Conversely, institutions characterized by persistent exclusion may experience reduced policy responsiveness and diminished public confidence, thereby weakening their capacity to deliver sustainable development outcomes. Institutional inclusiveness should therefore be viewed as an important dimension of governance effectiveness rather than solely as a measure of political equality.

Comparative African experiences reinforce this conclusion. Countries such as Rwanda, Namibia, and South Africa have combined institutional reforms promoting women's political representation with broader governance and development strategies aimed at strengthening public institutions and improving service delivery. Although these countries continue to confront important developmental challenges, their experiences demonstrate that expanding women's participation in political leadership can complement broader institutional reforms designed to enhance governance quality and promote inclusive development. These cases illustrate that gender-inclusive governance is most effective when embedded within wider institutional transformation rather than implemented as an isolated policy objective.

The analysis therefore extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that women's political representation contributes to sustainable development through institutional rather than purely numerical mechanisms. Feminist Institutionalism suggests that development outcomes are shaped by the interaction between institutional rules, governance practices, and patterns of political inclusion. Consequently, strengthening women's political participation expands the institutional capacity of governments to formulate inclusive public policies, improve governance effectiveness, and advance sustainable national development. For Nigeria, increasing women's representation should therefore be understood not merely as fulfilling international commitments but as an important institutional investment capable of strengthening democratic governance, enhancing policy responsiveness, and supporting long-term development objectives.

Integrating the Findings: Towards an Institutional Model of Gender-Inclusive Governance

The preceding analysis demonstrates that women's political representation should not be understood as an isolated issue of electoral participation or gender equality. Rather, it represents a broader institutional process through which political systems shape democratic governance, international legitimacy, and sustainable development. By integrating the findings across the preceding sections, this study proposes an Institutional Model of Gender-Inclusive Governance, which conceptualizes



women's political representation as the outcome of interactions between institutional structures and governance practices, with implications extending beyond domestic politics to the international sphere.

The analysis shows that political representation is fundamentally conditioned by the interaction between formal institutions and informal institutions. Formal institutions—including constitutional provisions, electoral laws, public policies, and party regulations—provide the legal framework for political participation and formally guarantee equal political rights. However, these legal commitments operate alongside informal institutions comprising patriarchal social norms, political patronage networks, elite recruitment practices, campaign financing structures, and organizational cultures that shape access to political leadership. The findings demonstrate that while Nigeria has developed an extensive formal framework supporting gender equality, informal institutional practices continue to constrain women's effective participation in politics. This interaction explains why significant gaps persist between constitutional commitments and actual representation.

The study further demonstrates that institutional arrangements produce consequences that extend beyond electoral outcomes. Where political institutions facilitate inclusive participation, they strengthen democratic legitimacy by enhancing representativeness, improving institutional accountability, and increasing public confidence in governance. Conversely, persistent exclusion weakens the representative character of democratic institutions and limits the diversity of perspectives available for public policy formulation. Women's political representation should therefore be viewed as an important indicator of institutional quality rather than simply a measure of numerical inclusion.

The findings also reveal that domestic institutional arrangements influence external perceptions of the state. Contemporary international relations increasingly evaluate states according to the quality of their governance institutions, commitment to democratic values, and adherence to internationally accepted norms of inclusion and equality. Consequently, institutional reforms promoting women's political participation contribute not only to domestic democratic consolidation but also to Nigeria's diplomatic credibility, normative influence, and international standing. Inclusive governance therefore constitutes an important source of institutional legitimacy within both domestic and international political arenas.

Similarly, the analysis demonstrates that women's political representation contributes to sustainable development by strengthening institutional effectiveness. Inclusive political institutions broaden policy deliberation, improve responsiveness to diverse societal needs, and enhance governments' capacity to formulate balanced development strategies. Sustainable development is therefore not solely dependent upon economic resources but also upon governance systems capable of mobilizing the knowledge, experiences, and contributions of all segments of society. Gender-inclusive governance expands this institutional capacity by enabling more representative and responsive public decision-making.

Drawing these findings together, the Institutional Model of Gender-Inclusive Governance proposed in this study conceptualizes institutional relationships as a sequential governance process. Formal institutions establish the legal opportunities for political participation, while informal institutions determine how those opportunities are exercised in practice. These institutional dynamics shape the level and quality of women's political representation, which subsequently influences three interconnected governance outcomes: democratic legitimacy, international standing, and sustainable development. Rather than operating independently, these outcomes reinforce one another. More inclusive political institutions strengthen democratic legitimacy; enhanced democratic legitimacy



contributes to greater international credibility; and improved governance legitimacy supports more effective and sustainable development outcomes. The relationship is therefore mutually reinforcing rather than linear.

This integrated framework extends existing scholarship in three important respects. First, it moves beyond descriptive analyses of women's political underrepresentation by identifying the institutional mechanisms through which exclusion is reproduced. Second, it bridges Political Science and International Relations by demonstrating how domestic political inclusion influences external diplomatic legitimacy and international reputation. Third, it broadens the application of Feminist Institutionalism by linking institutional structures not only to political representation but also to governance quality, diplomatic credibility, and sustainable development. In doing so, the study advances a more comprehensive understanding of gender-inclusive governance as both a democratic imperative and a strategic institutional resource.

The findings therefore suggest that improving women's political representation requires a holistic approach to institutional reform. Expanding numerical representation alone is unlikely to produce lasting change unless accompanied by reforms addressing the informal institutional practices that continue to shape political recruitment, leadership selection, campaign financing, and party organization. Sustainable progress depends upon aligning formal legal commitments with institutional practices that enable women to participate fully and effectively in political leadership. Such reforms would not only strengthen democratic inclusion but also enhance Nigeria's governance capacity, reinforce its international standing, and support the achievement of long-term development objectives.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between women's political representation and Nigeria's international standing by assessing the diplomatic and developmental implications of gender inclusion through the analytical lens of Feminist Institutionalism. The study demonstrates that women's political representation is not merely a question of numerical inclusion or electoral participation but a broader institutional issue with significant consequences for democratic governance, international legitimacy, and sustainable development. The findings reveal that although Nigeria has established formal legal frameworks promoting gender equality through constitutional guarantees, international commitments, and national policy initiatives, these formal institutions continue to operate alongside deeply embedded informal political practices that restrict women's effective participation in political leadership.

The study further demonstrates that institutional arrangements shape governance outcomes in ways that extend beyond domestic politics. Persistent underrepresentation of women weakens the inclusiveness and representative character of democratic institutions, limits the diversity of perspectives informing public policy, and constrains Nigeria's ability to project itself as a credible advocate of democratic governance within regional and international arenas. Conversely, strengthening women's political representation enhances democratic legitimacy by promoting broader political participation, reinforces diplomatic credibility through greater alignment with internationally accepted governance norms, and supports sustainable development by improving institutional responsiveness and policy effectiveness.

A major contribution of this study lies in its development of the Institutional Model of Gender-Inclusive Governance, which integrates the relationships among formal institutions, informal institutions, women's political representation, democratic legitimacy, international standing, and



sustainable development within a single analytical framework. Unlike much of the existing literature, which examines these issues separately, the model demonstrates that they are mutually reinforcing dimensions of governance. In doing so, the study extends the application of Feminist Institutionalism beyond explaining women's political participation to illustrating how institutional inclusion influences broader governance outcomes within contemporary democratic states.

The findings therefore suggest that meaningful progress in women's political representation requires more than constitutional guarantees or isolated policy interventions. Sustainable institutional change depends upon reforms that simultaneously strengthen formal legal frameworks and transform the informal political practices governing candidate recruitment, party leadership, campaign financing, and political competition. Gender-inclusive governance should therefore be understood not only as a democratic obligation but also as a strategic institutional resource capable of strengthening governance quality, enhancing international legitimacy, and supporting long-term national development.

Ultimately, the study argues that Nigeria's aspiration to strengthen its democratic credentials and expand its influence within regional and global governance institutions will depend, in part, on its capacity to build political institutions that are genuinely inclusive. Women's political representation is therefore not peripheral to democratic governance but constitutes an essential institutional foundation for a more legitimate, responsive, and internationally respected Nigerian state.

Recommendations

The findings of this study have important implications for public policy and institutional reform in Nigeria.

- 1. Political Party Reform:** Political parties should strengthen internal democratic processes by adopting transparent and gender-responsive candidate recruitment and leadership selection procedures. Specific measures could include mandatory gender quotas in party leadership positions, transparent nomination processes, and sanctions for parties that fail to meet gender representation targets. Because political parties constitute the principal gatekeepers to elective office, institutional reforms within party organizations are essential for expanding women's political participation.
- 2. Legislative and Constitutional Reforms:** Greater consideration should be given to legislative and constitutional reforms capable of promoting women's representation in elective and appointive positions. Options could include reserved seats for women in the National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly, or a constitutional amendment mandating that political party's field female candidates in a minimum proportion of constituencies. Such reforms should be accompanied by effective implementation mechanisms to ensure that formal commitments translate into measurable institutional outcomes.
- 3. Electoral and Security Reforms:** Governments and electoral management bodies should develop policies that reduce structural barriers confronting female political aspirants. Specific measures aimed at lowering the financial costs of political participation, strengthening electoral security, preventing gender-based political violence, and providing financial support for female candidates would improve the inclusiveness of political competition. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should also consider incentives for parties that nominate women.



4. **Civic Education Programs:** Civic education programs should be expanded to challenge discriminatory social norms and strengthen public support for women's political leadership. These programs should target both men and women and be implemented through schools, community organizations, and media platforms. Long-term institutional change requires transformation not only of formal political rules but also of the informal cultural practices that shape political participation.
5. **Foreign Policy Integration:** Nigeria should integrate gender inclusion more explicitly into its democratic governance and foreign policy agenda. Demonstrating measurable progress in women's political representation would reinforce the country's democratic credentials, strengthen its diplomatic credibility, and enhance its capacity to exercise normative leadership within regional and international organizations. Nigeria should also leverage its position in the AU and ECOWAS to advocate for regional gender-inclusion standards.
6. **Development Partner Coordination:** Development partners, civil society organizations, and regional institutions should continue supporting programs that promote women's political participation through leadership training, institutional capacity building, policy advocacy, and technical assistance. However, such programs should move beyond training and awareness-raising to focus on institutional reform and the strengthening of accountability mechanisms. Sustainable progress will require coordinated action among governmental institutions, political parties, civil society, and international partners to create an enabling institutional environment in which women can participate fully and effectively in political leadership.

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