

SUSTAINABLE GOVERNANCE AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP: RETHINKING DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The research examines the essential function of women's political leadership in Nigeria's quest for sustainable development. Grounded in Critical Mass Theory, Feminist Institutionalism, and Sustainable Governance Theory, the study contends that women's leadership transcends mere justice; it is a strategic imperative for realising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Inclusive Institutions). Notwithstanding decades of lobbying, Nigeria persists in facing pronounced gender gaps in government. Women occupy fewer than 10% of positions in the National Assembly, much below the 35% affirmative action standard established by the National Gender Policy. At both state and local levels, representation is constrained, with only marginal gains in female candidatures in recent electoral cycles. The research highlights that the under-representation of women is not just quantitative but fundamentally entrenched in patriarchal attitudes, party frameworks, financial obstacles, and inadequate implementation of gender legislation. Comparative data from Rwanda illustrates the transformational capacity of institutional enforcement. Rwanda's use of Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) has transformed government results, yielding inclusive policies in health, education, and community empowerment. Nigeria, in contrast, has faced challenges in institutionalising Gender Responsive Budgeting, resulting in women's leadership being predominantly symbolic rather than substantive. The study comes to the conclusion that more stringent enforcement of gender quotas, institutional changes, safeguarding women from political violence, and capacity-building programs are necessary for Nigeria to achieve sustainable government. Integrating fairness, participation, and accountability into governance frameworks will enable women's leadership to transition from mere symbolic representation to meaningful impact, therefore expediting Nigeria's advancement towards inclusive and sustainable development.

Keywords: female leadership, gender-responsive budgeting, inclusive engagement, sustainable development, Nigeria

Introduction

Worldwide, the political leadership of women is widely acknowledged as vital for sustainable development. Evidence from several settings indicates that women's involvement in governance enhances the likelihood of policies addressing healthcare, education, social protection, and poverty alleviation, all of which directly foster sustainable development. The United Nations (2015) and UN Women (2018) assert that women's participation in decision-making is essential for attaining equal social, economic, and political advancement. In Nigeria, gender inequities persist. Women are significantly under-represented in executive and legislative roles at both the federal and provincial levels. Notwithstanding Nigeria's obligations under international accords such as CEDAW and domestic frameworks like the National Gender Policy (2006, amended 2021), progress has been sluggish.

The introduction underscores the paradox of Nigerian women's political engagement: despite their growing visibility in grassroots movement and civil society, their presence in official political institutions remains negligible. This under-representation impedes Nigeria's capacity to attain inclusive government and sustainable development. The research contends that women's leadership pertains not just to equity but also to efficacy. States exhibiting elevated female involvement are inclined to implement more gender-sensitive policies, especially concerning maternity health, girls' education, and grassroots economic development. These policies directly promote Sustainable Development Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 4 (Quality Education), and 5 (Gender Equality). The introduction establishes the foundation for the study's primary assertion: Nigeria's sustainable development path is inextricably linked to women's political leadership. Nigeria risks maintaining systemic inequities that obstruct growth without intentional institutional adjustments.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Mass Theory

Critical Mass Theory asserts that women must attain a threshold, frequently identified as 30% representation, to significantly impact institutional practices and policy agendas. Below this barrier, women's voices are diminished, and their presence frequently becomes emblematic rather than transformational. In Nigeria, women occupy fewer than 10% of positions in the National Assembly, much below the critical mass. The number of women who have held gubernatorial positions is few, and their presence in state legislatures continues to be constrained. This under-representation impedes women's collective capacity to influence legislation and policies that promote the SDGs. Established instances demonstrate that solitary female leaders frequently face tokenism, which limits their ability to implement systemic change. In regions where women have attained more participation, such as certain local government councils, more gender-sensitive policymaking has developed. Policies concerning maternal health, female education, and community economic growth illustrate the concrete effects of women's leadership. Critical Mass Theory emphasises the necessity of intentional methods to enhance women's political engagement. Affirmative action programs, capacity-building activities, and measures to mitigate structural impediments, including financial marginalisation and political violence, are needed. Attaining critical mass is both a question of equity and a strategic need for sustainable development.

Feminist Institutionalism

Feminist Institutionalism (FI) analyses the ways in which formal and informal institutions sustain gendered power relations. Institutions are not impartial; they are imbued with traditions, regulations, and practices that frequently perpetuate patriarchal standards. In Nigeria,

official institutions, including electoral laws, party structures, and constitutions, often marginalise women. Elevated campaign expenditures, inadequate enforcement of gender quotas, and male-centric party leadership hinder women's entry to political authority. Informal institutions, such as patron-client networks, cultural practices, and social norms, exacerbate the marginalisation of women, solidifying the notion that politics is a male sphere. FI indicates that the under-representation of women is not just quantitative but also structural. Institutional cultures that favour male dominance hinder women's ability to promote gender-sensitive policies, even when attaining leadership roles. Nonetheless, FI also emphasises prospects for transformation. Female leaders have implemented programs on maternity health, education, and grassroots empowerment, contesting institutional norms and redefining priorities. These efforts illustrate how women may reshape governance objectives to conform with Sustainable Development Goals 5 (Gender Equality) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

FI asserts that mere increased engagement is inadequate. Institutional reforms are essential to eradicate patriarchal norms, enhance gender-sensitive legislation, and provide conditions that empower women to wield significant influence. This paradigm is essential for comprehending Nigeria's shift towards inclusive and sustainable government.

Sustainable Governance Theory

Sustainable governing Theory (SGT) underscores governing frameworks that harmonise economic development, social justice, and environmental conservation. Governance is perceived as a dynamic process necessitating involvement, responsibility, and adaptation to attain sustainable development goals. In the context of Nigeria, SGT emphasises the significance of inclusive leadership in tackling enduring issues such as poverty, inequality, and inadequate institutional capacity. Women's leadership is strongly aligned with sustainable governance concepts, since female leaders frequently emphasise community-oriented policies, social welfare, and grassroots empowerment. Initiatives led by women, including microfinance programs, maternal health projects, and girls' education, directly promote Sustainable Development Goals 3, 4, and 5. Female leaders enhance government involvement by championing marginalised groups, therefore reinforcing democratic legitimacy.

Nonetheless, SGT also reveals Nigeria's institutional deficiencies. Patriarchal norms, political violence, and resource limitations hinder women's full participation in government. In the absence of reforms like enhanced gender quotas, capacity-building programs, and protections against political violence, women's ability to foster sustainable development is significantly underexploited. SGT considers women's leadership as both a catalyst and a precondition for sustainable development. By integrating fairness, participation, and accountability into governance frameworks, women may contribute to the establishment of robust institutions that achieve sustainable developmental results.

Aim and Objectives

To rigorously analyse the impact of women's political leadership on promoting sustainable governance and developmental trajectories in Nigeria, focusing on institutional reforms, gender equality, and inclusive participation.

1. To examine systemic obstacles impeding women's political representation and leadership in Nigeria.
2. To juxtapose Nigeria's gender inclusion initiatives with Rwanda's institutional changes and Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB)

Methodology

The research employs a qualitative and conceptual design, combining institutional analysis with policy evaluation. The research, informed by Critical Mass Theory, Feminist Institutionalism, and Sustainable Governance Theory, investigates representation thresholds, institutional gender biases, and governance frameworks that ensure equity, participation, and sustainability. Data sources comprise official policy documents (e.g., the National Gender Policy), Nigeria’s obligations under CEDAW, federal and state budgetary reports, academic literature, UNDP and World Bank reports, election statistics (2019–2025), and publications from civil society organisations (e.g., Women in Politics Forum, ElectHER). Comparative case studies from Rwanda and South Africa offer contextual insights.

The approach examines both formal institutions (legislation, party systems, quotas) and informal norms (patronage, cultural expectations). Budgetary allocations and governance activities are examined for indications of Gender Responsive Budgeting and gender-sensitive policies. Nigeria's results are compared with regional and global standards to emphasise disparities and prospects. Triangulation is accomplished by the cross-referencing of several data sources. Recent data (2019–2025) is prioritised to maintain relevancy. Limitations encompass dependence on secondary data resulting from limited access to disaggregated budgetary information and insufficient recording of informal institutional processes.

Current State of Women’s Political Representation in Nigeria

Dimension	Status	Key Insights
National Assembly (Federal)	Women hold less than 10% of seats	Representation remains far below the 35% affirmative action target; Nigeria lags behind regional averages
State Assemblies	Limited representation	Civil society groups (e.g., Women in Politics Forum, ElectHER) provide mentorship, but systemic barriers persist
Gubernatorial Positions	Very few women governors nationwide	High campaign costs and patriarchal party structures discourage female candidacy
Local Government Councils	Slightly higher representation in some councils	Where women achieve visibility, policies tend to be more gender-sensitive and inclusive
Recent Elections (2019–2025)	Incremental increases in female candidates but overall representation remains below global averages	Despite record female candidacies in 2025, representation is still below the “critical mass” threshold of 30%

Table I: Current State of Women’s Political representation in Nigeria (2019–2025) (authors’ compilation, 2026)

Table 1 illustrates the enduring gender disparity in Nigeria's political framework at all levels of administration. At the federal level, women have fewer than 10% of seats in the National Assembly, a statistic that sharply diverges from the 35% affirmative action objective and regional norms. This under-representation signifies deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes and inadequate implementation of gender regulations. At the state level, women's representation remains constrained, despite mentorship attempts by civil society organisations like ElectHER and the Women in Politics Forum. Structural impediments, such as party politics and budgetary limitations, persist in obstructing advancement.

Gubernatorial roles exhibit the most pronounced discrepancy, with a scant number of women serving as governors across the nation. Elevated campaign expenditures and male-centric

party frameworks deter female candidature, perpetuating systematic exclusion. Local government councils exhibit a somewhat more optimistic scenario, with areas of enhanced representation. In contexts where women attain prominence at the grassroots level, policies are often more inclusive and attuned to gender considerations, illustrating the concrete effects of female leadership.

Between 2019 and 2025, recent elections have seen gradual rises in female candidatures, culminating in unprecedented figures in 2025. Nonetheless, total representation continues to fall short of the critical mass level of 30%, frequently referenced as essential for meaningful policy impact. The chart highlights that despite some progress, Nigeria's political system is deficient in achieving substantial gender parity, necessitating more robust institutional changes and enforcement tools to eliminate structural obstacles.

Women's political representation in Nigeria remains inferior to both regional and global averages, despite years of activism and legislative initiatives designed to enhance gender participation (Olaleye, Adeyemi, Akorede, Akinrinlola & Tijani; 2026). Women have historically been disadvantaged in political contexts due to institutional restrictions, cultural expectations, and patriarchal norms that limit their access to leadership posts. Female involvement in government has consistently been minimal since independence, with recent electoral cycles indicating only marginal enhancements (Agbalajobi, 2010). Women occupy fewer than 10% of seats in the National Assembly at the federal level, much below the 35% affirmative action target set by Nigeria's National Gender Policy (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). Women hold around 4% of elected positions globally, indicating persistent gender gap as seen by the 2019 and 2023 elections. Notwithstanding a historic influx of female candidates for parliamentary positions in the 2025 elections, total representation remains behind the "critical mass" benchmark of 30% necessary for substantial impact on policy outcomes (Dahlerup, 1988).

Despite notable progress, women's representation at the state level remains relatively constrained. Civil society organisations such as the Women in Politics Forum (WIPF) and ElectHER have played a crucial role in enhancing the visibility and competitiveness of female candidates in state assembly and gubernatorial campaigns through mentorship and support (Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2003). Women today possess more opportunities to contest existing political frameworks and garner support from diverse constituencies due to grassroots initiatives and online campaigning (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2022). Despite these enhancements, structural obstacles persist. Women continue to face disadvantages due to elevated campaign expenditures, inadequate enforcement of gender quotas, and male-dominated party structures. Political violence and intimidation not only deter female participation but also reinforce the perception of politics as a male-dominated arena. These impediments not only perpetuate gender inequity but also hinder Nigeria's pursuit of inclusive government and sustainable development (Krook & Mackay, 2011).

In conclusion, despite a recent increase in support for women's political representation in Nigeria, the current scenario reveals a paradox: women are gaining prominence in grassroots leadership and campaigning, yet they remain under-represented in formal political institutions. Intentional institutional reforms, rigorous enforcement of affirmative action legislation, and ongoing efforts to dismantle patriarchal norms that restrict women's political leadership are essential for attaining gender parity (Meadowcroft, 2007).

Systemic Obstacles to Women's Political Leadership in Nigeria

Deeply entrenched systemic impediments inside both formal and informal institutions persist in restricting women's political leadership in Nigeria. These impediments hinder women's access to political positions and diminish their ability to influence governance outcomes.

Patriarchal cultural norms provide a significant barrier to women's political leadership in Nigeria. These traditions, which allocate women to domestic and nurturing roles while characterising politics as a male-dominated sphere, are deeply entrenched in traditional beliefs and practices. Consequently, women aspiring to pursue governmental positions are often perceived as transgressing cultural limits, undermining their legitimacy and diminishing public support. Female politicians face stigmatisation and ridicule in several countries, with their ambitions dismissed as inappropriate or contrary to societal standards. Women are under-represented in governance and are dissuaded from seeking office because of this cultural environment (Agbalajobi, 2010). Both formal and informal institutions perpetuate these patriarchal norms. Political parties often embody cultural biases by relegating women to subordinate leadership positions and restricting them to "women's wings" within their organisational frameworks (Krook & Mackay, 2011). Women are further disadvantaged by informal activities such as patron-client networks due to their unequal access to political and financial resources compared to men. Moreover, patriarchal ideologies perpetuate the notion that women pose a threat in political spheres, resulting in gender-based harassment and political violence that disproportionately affect female candidates (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2022). Collectively, these institutional and cultural barriers inhibit women from attaining the "critical mass" necessary to influence policy agendas and advance sustainable development outcomes (Dahlerup, 1988).

Nigeria's political system is extensively commercialised, necessitating substantial financial resources for party nomination forms, campaign financing, and electoral mobilisation. Women sometimes struggle to compete with their male counterparts due to their disproportionately restricted access to economic resources, which affords males more financial backing and established networks of favour. The substantial financial requirements hinder many capable women from transforming their political ambitions into viable candidatures, hence perpetuating gender unfairness (Agbalajobi, 2010). There exists a correlation between the monetisation of politics and broader structural inequities. Women in Nigeria are hindered in accumulating the resources necessary for political engagement due to income disparities, constrained property rights, and restricted economic opportunities (Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2003). Consequently, female candidates often depend on external sponsors, so compromising their autonomy and diminishing their negotiating power within political parties. This issue is exacerbated by the lack of institutional mechanisms like as gender-sensitive financial policies or campaign financing assistance, which disadvantages women in securing party nominations and mobilising grassroots support (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2022).

Political parties serve as the primary gatekeepers to political office; nonetheless, they remain predominantly male-dominated in both leadership and decision-making roles. Women are sometimes confined to "women's wings" or subordinate roles inside parties, therefore constraining their impact on policy formulation and candidate selection (Krook & Mackay, 2011). This marginalisation results in women, although being active participants in political parties, seldom attaining roles on party executive committees or obtaining viable candidatures during elections. The issue is intensified by the absence of internal democracy inside political parties, where women are consistently marginalised (Agbalajobi, 2010). Moreover, although commitments under the National Gender Policy and international accords such as CEDAW, Nigerian political parties have been lethargic in implementing affirmative action or gender quotas. Political parties have successfully upheld regulations that inhibit women's substantial participation due to the inadequate implementation of these frameworks. Women, sometimes

possessing lower access to financial resources compared to men, are disproportionately affected by the elevated costs of nomination forms and party-mandated campaign funding limitations. Consequently, women's presence in party structures remains symbolic rather than substantive, so constraining their ability to influence government (Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2003; Olaleye et al, 2026). Reforms that support gender quotas, promote internal party democracy, and provide institutional and financial assistance to female candidates are essential to address these structural barriers. In the absence of such reforms, political parties would prolong patriarchal norms that hinder women's leadership and obstruct Nigeria's progress toward inclusive and sustainable government (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2022).

Nigerian elections are often characterised by intimidation, violence, and harassment, posing significant risks for female candidates. Gender-based violence, from verbal harassment to violent assaults, often deters women from seeking political office. This hostile climate sustains women's under-representation in government by reinforcing patriarchal notions that politics is a perilous and unsuitable domain for women (Agbalajobi, 2010). Intimidation can manifest in subtle yet equally detrimental forms alongside physical attack. To undermine their candidature, female candidates often face character assassination, smear campaigns, and societal stigmatisation (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2022). To further diminish popular support, political parties and adversaries employ cultural prejudices to depict women as unfit for leadership positions. By suppressing diverse perspectives, these actions erode democratic inclusion and limit women's access to political positions. Enhanced institutional safeguards, including legal protections, the adoption of gender-sensitive policies, and measures to ensure women's safety during electoral processes, are essential given the widespread occurrence of political violence and intimidation. If structural issues are not resolved, women would persistently face significant barriers to meaningful involvement and contributions to Nigeria's sustainable development goal (Krook & Mackay, 2011).

The inadequate institutional implementation of gender rules remains a significant obstacle to women's political participation and leadership in Nigeria. The National Gender Policy (2006) mandates a 35% affirmative action quota for women in government, representing a progressive framework embraced by the nation; nonetheless, its implementation has been inconsistent and largely symbolic. Women are under-represented in both elected and appointed positions due to the frequent failure of political parties and governmental bodies to integrate these commitments into their frameworks (Agbalajobi, 2010). The inconsistency between policy formulation and execution reflects broader institutional deficiencies, including the presence of rules and regulations in theory, yet a lack of accountability and compliance mechanisms. Moreover, Nigeria's ratification of international accords such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has not yielded substantial improvement. Political parties can evade gender quotas and sustain male-dominated leadership frameworks due to insufficient supervision mechanisms and consequences for noncompliance (Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2003). Despite favourable policies, institutional inertia and patriarchal resistance within governance systems hinder women's access to leadership positions. Gender policies may devolve into tokenism and serve just as rhetorical commitments rather than transformative tools if not deliberately implemented. Consequently, to eliminate structural impediments, ensure equitable representation, and advance Nigeria's trajectory towards inclusive government and sustainable development, the reinforcement of institutional enforcement is needed (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2022).

Comparative Case Study: Rwanda and Nigeria on Women’s Political Representation and Gender-Responsive Budgeting

Rwanda is often considered as a global exemplar in women's political representation, with women holding more than 60% of seats in its national parliament since 2008 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). This accomplishment is mostly ascribed to intentional institutional reforms, encompassing constitutional quotas, robust enforcement measures, and political party pledges to gender inclusion. In addition to representation, Rwanda has incorporated Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) into its national planning framework, guaranteeing that public expenditures are rigorously assessed for their effects on both men and women. Evidence indicates that this has led to significant enhancements in maternal health, girls' education, and poverty alleviation (World Bank, 2020).

In contrast, Nigeria persists in grappling with the under-representation of women, since fewer than 10% of National Assembly seats are occupied by women, alongside inadequate enforcement of the 35% affirmative action objective (National Gender Policy, 2021). GRB continues to be predominantly aspirational, characterised by budgeting processes that are mainly gender-blind and a constrained institutional ability to execute gender-sensitive allocations. Although women leaders in Nigeria have promoted inclusive policies in health and education, their influence is limited by patriarchal party frameworks, exorbitant campaign expenses, and political violence. Consequently, Nigeria has not yet attained the transformational results linked to gender parity in governance.

Indicator	Rwanda	Nigeria
Women in Parliament (%)	Over 60% since 2008 (highest globally)	Less than 10% in National Assembly (2023)
Gender Quotas	Constitutional quota (30% minimum), strongly enforced	35% affirmative action target in National Gender Policy, weak enforcement
GRB Adoption	Institutionalized in national planning and budgeting frameworks	Largely aspirational; budgetary processes remain gender-blind
Development Outcomes	Improvements in maternal health, girls’ education, poverty reduction	Incremental gains in health and education, but systemic barriers persist
Institutional Enforcement	Strong accountability mechanisms; quotas embedded in party structures	Weak oversight; parties circumvent quotas and maintain male-dominated leadership

Table II: Comparative Indicators: Rwanda vs. Nigeria (source: authors’ compilation)

Table II indicates that Rwanda exceeds the threshold, while Nigeria falls short (Critical Mass Theory). Rwanda's institutions implement quotas, whereas Nigeria's are patriarchal (Feminist Institutionalism). Additionally, Rwanda's integration of Gender Responsive Budgeting produces quantifiable lessons for Nigeria (Sustainable Governance Theory). This comparison underscores two essential insights: Rwanda's performance illustrates that quotas and Gender Responsive Budgeting frameworks require robust accountability mechanisms (institutional enforcement is crucial) and that representation influences outcomes. Higher female participation corresponds with more inclusive policies and demonstrable social advancements, highlighting the strategic significance of attaining critical mass in Nigeria.

The comparative research highlights the essential function of institutional enforcement in influencing women's political leadership and sustainable governance results. Rwanda's

experience illustrates that exceeding the Critical Mass barrier, with women occupying over 60% of parliamentary seats, leads to revolutionary policies, especially when integrated with Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB). Rwanda has institutionalised gender inclusion by incorporating quotas inside constitutional and party frameworks, so affirming Feminist Institutionalism's assertion that official regulations may challenge patriarchal practices when supported by accountability mechanisms. Nigeria's inadequate execution of its 35% affirmative action objective exemplifies the ineffectiveness of symbolic legislation in effecting meaningful change. Although female leaders promote inclusive programs in health and education, their influence is limited by patriarchal party frameworks, exorbitant campaign expenses, and political violence. According to Sustainable Governance Theory, Rwanda's incorporation of Gender Responsive Budgeting into national planning has resulted in quantifiable advancements in maternal health, female education, and poverty alleviation, whereas Nigeria's gender-neutral budgeting persists in constraining fair resource distribution.

This comparison indicates that Nigeria's trajectory towards sustainable governance needs intentional reforms: enhanced enforcement of gender quotas, institutionalisation of Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB), and safeguarding women from political violence. Implementing these changes will not only promote SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Inclusive Institutions) but also enhance Nigeria's ability to achieve inclusive development results. Rwanda's achievement demonstrates that women's leadership is not only symbolic but also a strategic essential for sustainable governance; an imperative that Nigeria must adopt to eliminate structural hurdles and expedite its growth trajectory.

Sustainable Development and Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB)

Sustainable development, as defined by the UN, promotes a balanced integration of social inclusion, economic growth, and environmental sustainability to meet current and future needs. This notion posits that gender equality is essential for development and a matter of human rights. According to scholars such as Amartya Sen (1999), development should be perceived as the expansion of freedoms, including women's access to economic and political possibilities. Nigeria's ability to achieve inclusive development outcomes has been hindered by persistent gender inequalities in resource allocation and governance. Consequently, fostering sustainable development necessitates the incorporation of gender considerations into governance processes, particularly in budgeting.

Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) is a strategic approach for integrating gender problems into public expenditure and economic policy. As to UN Women (2018), Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) involves reallocating spending to promote gender parity and assessing the differential impacts of budgets on men and women. Diane Elson (2002) asserts that Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) focuses on modifying mainstream budgets to rectify gender disparities rather than establishing distinct budgets for women. The use of Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) can facilitate the reallocation of resources to critical sectors such as maternal health, female education, and women's economic empowerment in Nigeria, where budgetary processes have historically overlooked gender considerations, hence improving overall development results.

Women's political leadership is crucial for promoting sustainable development and gender-responsive budgeting (GRB). Studies demonstrate that an increased female representation in political institutions enhances inclusive policymaking and elevates the prioritisation of social welfare issues. According to Kabeer (2015), female leaders are more inclined to endorse legislation addressing inequality and human development. Nonetheless, women remain under-represented in political roles in Nigeria, limiting their capacity to impact development agendas

and fiscal decisions. The adoption and effective implementation of GRB may be enhanced by bolstering women's political leadership and ensuring that public resources are allocated in a manner that addresses the needs of all citizens.

The outcomes of sustainable development in Nigeria are significantly affected by the intersection of Gender Responsive Budgeting and women's political leadership. Women may advocate for gender-sensitive policies and ensure accountability in public expenditure through active participation in governance. World Bank data from 2020 indicates that countries with higher levels of gender equality in leadership generally have advancements in poverty reduction, education, and health outcomes. In Nigeria, structural inequities may be mitigated and inclusive growth fostered by integrating Gender Responsive Budgeting into policy frameworks with robust female political representation. This relationship directly supports essential Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to gender equality, poverty reduction, and effective governance.

Notwithstanding its promise, several impediments hinder the implementation of GRB in Nigeria, including insufficient institutional capacity, absence of gender-disaggregated data, and a deficiency in political commitment. Budlender (2005) asserts that effective Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) requires technical expertise, robust political commitment, and active participation from civil society. Establishing institutional frameworks, enhancing data systems, and promoting gender awareness among policymakers are essential to surmount these challenges in Nigeria. Significantly, augmenting the representation of women in political leadership roles may facilitate these transformations and ensure the integration of Gender Responsive Budgeting into national development objectives.

In conclusion, the integration of gender perspectives in governance, particularly via Gender-Responsive Budgeting, is closely linked to sustainable development in Nigeria. Women's political leadership is crucial in shaping policy objectives and ensuring equitable resource allocation. The United Nations Development Programme (2021) asserts that achieving sustainable and equitable development necessitates inclusive governance structures that empower women. Therefore, institutionalising Gender Responsive Budgeting practices and enhancing women's political participation are essential strategies for advancing sustainable development in Nigeria.

Policy and Legislative Frameworks

The policy and legislative frameworks establish the institutional foundation for promoting gender equality, women's political participation, and sustainable development. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are significant global frameworks developed by the UN that advocate for inclusive governance and gender equality. Achieving equal development results is contingent upon women's political leadership. Robust legal and regulatory frameworks are necessary to eliminate structural barriers that hinder women's access to public resources and decision-making processes, as articulated by UN Women (2018).

Nigeria has established many national policies and legislative instruments to promote women's political leadership and enhance gender equality. The National Gender Policy (2006, modified 2021) stipulates that affirmative action for women in politics and public life shall be no less than 35%. Nigeria has accepted international accords such as CEDAW, mandating the government to eliminate discrimination against women in all domains, including governance. Nonetheless, due to institutional challenges, political resistance, and societal limitations, implementation has remained insufficient despite these assurances. The United Nations

Development Programme (2021) asserts that Nigeria's advancement in gender equality is still obstructed by the disparity between policy formulation and implementation.

Legislative frameworks are necessary for the institutionalisation of Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB). To ensure that gender perspectives are systematically included into budget planning, implementation, and evaluation, Gender Responsive Budgeting requires legislative backing. Despite Nigeria's significant progress in public financial management reforms, neither the federal nor state governments has a complete legislation mandating Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB). Diane Elson (2002) asserts that GRB attempts often remain fragmented and dependent on political goodwill without substantial legislative backing. Augmenting accountability and guaranteeing that public expenditure tackles gender disparities in sectors such as health, education, and employment would be two advantages of fortifying the legal mandates of Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB).

The efficacy of these legal and policy frameworks is directly correlated with women's political leadership. Women in leadership positions are more inclined to endorse gender-sensitive legislation and policies. Kabeer (2015) asserts that women's participation in governance promotes inclusive development and enhances policy responsiveness to social demands. Augmenting the representation of women in Nigeria's legislative bodies can facilitate the enactment and execution of policies that advance sustainable development and gender-responsive budgeting. The practical application of these frameworks is limited by the existing low level of female political representation. Attaining sustainable development outcomes necessitates institutional coordination and policy consistency. Effective frameworks must ensure collaboration among governmental institutions and align national development strategies with gender equality objectives. The World Bank (2020) indicates that countries with strong legal and regulatory frameworks promoting gender equality often have better development outcomes, including reduced poverty and improved human capital. In Nigeria, integrating gender views into national and subnational policies helps ensure inclusivity and enhance the efficacy of development projects.

Despite the existence of several frameworks, their effectiveness is nonetheless compromised by challenges such as inadequate funding, weak enforcement mechanisms, and an absence of gender-disaggregated data. Enhancing civil society engagement, cultivating political will, and strengthening institutional capacity are essential to tackle these issues. In summary, the implementation of Gender-Responsive Budgeting, the advancement of women's political leadership, and the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria are contingent upon robust legal and regulatory frameworks. The enhancement of inclusive governance and development outcomes would be significantly improved by strengthening these frameworks and ensuring their successful implementation.

The "Strategic Minority" Effect the Gender-Development Link

A diminutive yet dynamic and strategically situated group can exert an outsized influence on institutional outcomes and decision-making processes, as posited by the "strategic minority" effect theory. This term aligns with the notion of "critical actors" rather than just "critical mass" in political sociology and gender studies. Dahlerup (1988) posits that the nature of women's participation in office is more significant than their numerical representation in political institutions. Krook (2010) emphasises that individual women in leadership positions may initiate policy change, especially when they occupy critical posts within influential committees or ministries. This perspective highlights the potential for female leaders to impact governmental results in Nigeria via strategic engagement, lobbying, and coalition formation, despite the low participation of women in politics.

The relationship between gender and development underscores the intrinsic connection between sustainable development and gender equality. Empowering women significantly enhances development outcomes, including increases in household income, education, and child welfare (Duflo, 2012). The Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5, which underscores the attainment of gender equality as a prerequisite for comprehensive development success, further illustrates the United Nations' reaffirmation of this link (2015). Nigeria's advancement is, however, obstructed by persistent gender inequalities in access to economic, healthcare, and educational opportunities. Consequently, bridging these discrepancies is essential for achieving sustainable and equitable growth.

Women's political leadership significantly influences development plans, exemplifying the interplay between the gender-development nexus and the strategic minority effect. Despite their under-representation, women can nevertheless influence legislative objectives, particularly on human development and social welfare issues. Goetz (2003) asserts that women in politics often advocate for social protection, healthcare, and education, all of which are vital for sustainable development. Female lawmakers and policymakers in Nigeria have significantly influenced advancements in public health, education, and gender equality, demonstrating that a strategic minority can effectuate development-oriented change despite numerical limitations.

Furthermore, the involvement of women in leadership positions may provide more inclusive and equitable governance outcomes. Devaki Jain (2005) asserts that women's diverse perspectives enhance institutions' responsiveness to public demands in policymaking. This is particularly crucial for Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB), wherein female executives may advocate for financing programs that address gender inequity. Incorporating Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) into governance processes will improve development outcomes in Nigeria by ensuring that public expenditure addresses the needs of both men and women, therefore fostering social inclusion and economic efficiency.

Nevertheless, structural and cultural constraints sometimes impede the effectiveness of the strategic minority. Waylen (2014) asserts that gender biases and institutional norms might limit women's influence in political contexts, notwithstanding their formal positions of power. The involvement and efficacy of women in leadership positions in Nigeria continue to be obstructed by patriarchal norms, limited access to political financing, and insufficient institutional support. Extensive legal reforms, capacity building, and a societal transition towards gender equality are essential to resolve these difficulties.

The connection between gender and development, together with the influence of the "strategic minority," provides a sophisticated insight into how women's political leadership fosters sustainable development in Nigeria. The strategic actions of women in leadership roles may significantly influence policy and development pathways, notwithstanding the ongoing necessity of enhancing women's representation. Despite their under-representation in political institutions, women may substantially promote sustainable development by leveraging their positions to advocate for gender-responsive policies, inclusive governance, and fair resource allocation.

Conclusion

This study has shown that women's political leadership is both an issue of equity and a strategic need for Nigeria's sustained development. The analysis, viewed through the frameworks of Critical Mass Theory, Feminist Institutionalism, and Sustainable Governance Theory, indicated that Nigeria's ongoing under-representation of women in governance hampers inclusive policymaking and impedes advancement toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The story of Rwanda demonstrates that the implementation of institutional changes, including

gender quotas and Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB), may lead to significant advancements in women's leadership, resulting in quantifiable enhancements in health, education, and poverty alleviation. The ramifications for Nigeria are unequivocal. Attaining sustainable governance necessitates transcending just symbolic pledges to gender equality and adopting intentional institutional reforms. Enhanced implementation of the 35% affirmative action objective, incorporation of Gender Responsive Budgeting into national and state budgeting frameworks, and strong safeguards against political violence are imperative measures. These changes will not only abolish patriarchal obstacles but also enhance Nigeria's ability to achieve inclusive development results.

Recommendations

1. In line with the National Gender Policy, the government ought to enact and enforce laws guaranteeing that women occupy a minimum of 35% of public and political posts in Nigeria.
2. A comprehensive institutional and legislative framework for Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) must be built at the federal, state, and municipal levels.
3. Targeted measures such as reduced nomination fees for women, governmental funding assistance, and specialist campaign financing strategies should be used to mitigate financial barriers for women.
4. To promote women involvement, political parties should enact internal reforms, including fair access to resources, transparent candidate selection processes, and mandatory quotas in leadership roles, so facilitating more competitiveness for elected posts.
5. The government and electoral officials must implement stricter restrictions to prevent political violence and protect female candidates.
6. Public education initiatives, media involvement, and community activism must be amplified to confront patriarchal conventions and foster the acceptance of women in political leadership roles.

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