

The Gendered Politics of Power: Women's Representation and Political Leadership in Benue State

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Abstract

Despite worldwide efforts to promote gender equality in governance, women in Nigeria, particularly in Benue State, remain largely underrepresented in political leadership. This study critically examines the gendered nature of political participation in Benue State, exploring socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that hinder women's political representation. Through a mixed-methods approach involving key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document review, the study finds that male-controlled structures, economic disenfranchisement, political violence, and party gatekeeping mechanisms severely limit women's access to leadership positions. Furthermore, the tokenistic inclusion of women in governance, without real power or influence, reinforces existing gender inequalities. The study emphasizes the significance of policy reforms, affirmative action, and gender-sensitive party structures in addressing these disparities. By shedding light on the lived experiences of women politicians and aspiring female leaders in Benue State, this paper contributes to broader debates on inclusive governance and the reimagining of political spaces to accommodate gender diversity.

Keywords: Gender, Political Representation, Leadership, Benue State, Women in Politics

Introduction

Inclusive and gender-sensitive governance has increasingly become a global imperative, with international frameworks and national policies emphasizing the need to ensure equal participation of all genders in political and decision-making processes. However, in many African nations, including Nigeria, the journey toward equitable representation continues at a millipede's pace. Nigeria's political landscape remains deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms, often relegating women to subordinate roles despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments to gender equality.

Benue State, located in the North-Central region of Nigeria and widely referred to as the "food basket of the nation," mirrors this national reality. With a predominantly agrarian population engaged in farming activities such as yam cultivation, fish farming, cassava production, and the growing of tropical fruits and seedlings, the state's economic

vitality stands in stark contrast to the stagnancy of gender inclusion in governance. Women's political representation in the state remains minimal, reflecting broader national challenges of gender inequality.

Despite democratic advancements, the underrepresentation of women in politics and leadership positions in Benue State raises critical concerns. Cultural norms, religious beliefs, limited access to resources, and systemic gender discrimination contribute to an uneven political playing field. These barriers not only hinder women's participation but also undermine democratic ideals and slow the pace of inclusive and sustainable development.

In response to this reality, this study seeks to explore the current landscape of women's political involvement in Benue State. It specifically aims to assess the extent of women's political representation and identify key barriers impeding women's political participation. It examines the impact of women's leadership on governance and development, and propose actionable strategies for enhancing women's political empowerment in the state. To guide the research, the study poses four key research questions: What is the extent of women's political representation in Benue State? What are the major barriers hindering women's political leadership? How has women's political leadership impacted governance in Benue State? What strategies can be employed to increase women's political participation?

By focusing on the unique socio-political context of Benue State, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on gender and politics in Nigeria. Its findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, civil society actors, gender advocates, and political stakeholders who are committed to promoting inclusive governance and dismantling the structural and cultural impediments to women's political participation.

Feminist Institutionalism and Gendered Political Structures in Benue State

This study is anchored in Feminist Institutionalism (FI), a theoretical approach that critically examines how both formal rules and informal norms within political institutions are inherently gendered, shaping access to power and resources in ways that often marginalize women (Mackay, Kenny & Chappell, 2010). FI posits that institutions are not gender-neutral; rather, they are constructed through, and continue to reproduce, power relations that privilege male dominance. This framework allows for a deeper interrogation of how political structures, practices, and resistance mechanisms in Benue State function to reinforce gender exclusions or allow for partial and symbolic inclusion.

Within the Benue context, FI provides explanatory power to explore three interlocking dimensions:

1. Gendering of political party structures, electoral systems, and patronage networks
- Political parties in Benue State lack institutionalized gender inclusion mechanisms. Candidate selection processes are heavily shaped by patronage, clientelism, and informal "godfather" networks that systematically exclude women from nomination and electoral support. The absence of internal gender

- quotas and weak support structures render the parties' gender-exclusive and deeply hierarchical (Nwankwo, 2018).
2. Intersection of informal power relations and traditional authority with women's leadership – Traditional leadership systems and customary norms continue to wield significant influence over political legitimacy and public participation in Benue. These informal institutions often subordinate women's voices, relegating them to auxiliary roles, thus inhibiting their ability to contest or lead meaningfully in political spaces (Akor, 2017; Omenka, 2021).
 3. Institutional reforms and resistance – While constitutional frameworks and international gender equality commitments exist, implementation is weak. Some progress has been observed through the advocacy of women-led networks and civil society groups that push for party-level reforms, mentorship initiatives, and gender-sensitive electoral laws. Yet, entrenched resistance within male-dominated institutions continues to limit transformative change (Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2003).

By embedding these dimensions into the analysis, Feminist Institutionalism enables this study to go beyond surface-level representation figures and instead unpack how institutional designs, informal norms, and power asymmetries jointly produce exclusionary outcomes, while also identifying potential entry points for gender-transformative reforms.

Institutional Limitations to Inclusive Representation of Women in Benue State

Women's representation in Nigeria and by extension, Benue State remains structurally constrained by a confluence of patriarchal ideologies, socio-cultural expectations, institutional inertia, and economic disenfranchisement. Despite formal guarantees of equality and democratic inclusion, the political terrain is overwhelmingly shaped by gendered practices that limit women's participation at all levels (Oloyede, 2016; Okoli & Umeh, 2019).

In Benue, traditional leadership hierarchies and ethno-political loyalties exacerbate the exclusion of women from decision-making spaces. Power is predominantly exercised through male-dominated systems of traditional authority that are resistant to female participation, even at the community level (Akor, 2017). Where women do access political spaces, their roles are frequently tokenistic or symbolic, with little substantive authority or influence over policy (Omenka, 2021).

The structure of political parties in Benue State reflects the broader national pattern of exclusion. They often lack affirmative policies, have poorly defined gender charters, and operate within opaque patronage systems that privilege well-connected male aspirants. Financial barriers, political violence, and the lack of mentoring and capacity-building mechanisms further marginalize aspiring women leaders (Nwankwo, 2018; Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2003).

These institutional limitations are deeply embedded, but not immutable. Feminist Institutionalism highlights those institutions are capable of change through incremental reforms, resistance, and norm contestation. As such, scholars and advocates propose reforms such as gender-responsive budgeting, legal quotas, and institutionalized mentorship programs to counterbalance exclusionary practices and promote women's leadership.

In sum, without deliberate restructuring of both formal electoral and party mechanisms and informal gendered norms, women's full and equal political participation in Benue State will remain elusive. This study, therefore, leverages FI theory to critically analyze not only the barriers but also the pathways through which women can reclaim political space and contribute meaningfully to governance and development in the state.

Gender and Political Representation

Worldwide, women have made notable strides in political representation; however, disparities remain stark in many developing countries. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2022) reports that as of 2021, women held only 26.1% of parliamentary seats worldwide, with Sub-Saharan Africa recording a slightly higher average of 26.4%. Nigeria lags significantly behind with less than 10% female representation at both national and state levels.

Olojede (2013) and Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet (2002) assert that political institutions in Nigeria, while formally inclusive, operate in ways that structurally exclude women. These structures include informal networks, patronage systems, and gendered expectations that disadvantage women.

Barriers to Women's Political Participation

Several empirical studies have identified multiple intersecting barriers affecting women's participation in politics. Akiyode-Afolabi and Arogundade (2016) argue that patriarchal values dominate Nigerian society, limiting women's roles to the domestic sphere. Political violence, often weaponized against female candidates, is also a key deterrent (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2004).

Despite global advances in gender equality, women's political participation remains limited due to persistent structural, socio-cultural, and institutional barriers. Scholars argue that patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes continue to define leadership as a male domain, thereby limiting women's access to political spaces (Tripp, 2001). In many societies, including Nigeria, women are often perceived as caregivers and supporters rather than decision-makers, reinforcing traditional roles that exclude them from leadership (Okeke-Ihejirika & Franceschet, 2002).

Economic constraints are another critical barrier. Women typically have less access to financial resources necessary for political campaigns, which hinders their ability to compete effectively with male counterparts (Ballington & Matland, 2004). The political environment itself is often hostile to women, characterized by gender-based violence, intimidation, and discriminatory practices within political parties (Bauer &

Britton, 2006). These structural challenges are compounded by weak policy enforcement. Although legal frameworks and gender quotas exist in some contexts, their implementation is often ineffective, allowing male-dominated systems to persist (Oloyede, 2016).

Economic disenfranchisement further compounds women's exclusion. Campaign financing in Nigeria is heavily monetized, and women who are more likely to be economically marginalized often lack the resources to compete effectively. Additionally, party politics in Nigeria are highly masculinized. Parties often do not field female candidates in winnable positions and rarely provide support mechanisms to encourage women's candidacy (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2013).

Internal party dynamics also serve as barriers. Political parties often lack gender-sensitive structures and processes that promote women's representation. Women are sidelined in party leadership and decision-making, and candidate selection processes often favor incumbents or influential male candidates (Meintjes, 2003). Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive approach, including legal reforms, capacity-building initiatives, cultural reorientation, and the institutionalization of affirmative action within political structures.

Women in Leadership and Governance

Where women have accessed political leadership positions, research shows positive outcomes in terms of policy orientation and development focus. Women leaders tend to prioritize education, healthcare, and community development. This has been observed both globally and in the Nigerian context (Nzomo, 1997; Tsenongu, 2018).

However, the issue of tokenism persists. Many women in political office lack real influence due to marginal positioning within power hierarchies. Goetz and Hassim (2003) argue that mere numerical representation is insufficient without substantive and transformative power.

Policy Reforms, Affirmative Action, and the Gendered Political Party Structures in Benue State

Women representation and participation in political leadership in Benue state is indicative of entrenched structural and institutional barriers that require deliberate policy interventions. In spite of the government of Nigeria commitments to gender equality and the global frameworks on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Beijing Platform for Action, there seem to still be a marginalized representation of women in Benue state political scenario. Women are more utilized as social supporters but not considered for absolute leadership position. In the bid to remedy this systemic imbalance, a gender-sensitive structure of the state political parties organized as a key need to integrate policy reforms, ensure implementation of affirmative action and the restructuring of calls for robust policy reforms.

Unlocking Political Inclusion Through Policy Reforms

Policy reforms serve as a foundational pathway for breaking down the legal, institutional, and socio-political obstacles that hinder women's active participation in politics. In Benue State, the lack of enforceable legislative frameworks that guarantee women's inclusion in political and governance processes has significantly limited progress toward gender equity. To foster meaningful inclusion, reforms must prioritize the incorporation of gender quotas into state electoral laws, enforce parity in political appointments, and ensure that political and electoral codes adopt inclusive and gender-responsive language.

Furthermore, the reinforcement of gender-responsive budgeting and robust accountability systems is essential for channeling public resources into initiatives that build women's political skills and leadership capacity. Countries and subnational regions that have enacted gender-focused legislative reforms have recorded significant improvements in women's political representation. Therefore, similar reforms in Benue could serve as a foundational pillar for long-term change.

Affirmative Action as a Corrective Tool

Affirmative action is an obligatory corrective strategy that compensates for historical injustices and systemic exclusion of women from leadership spaces. The National Gender Policy (2006) recommends a minimum of 35% representation of women in all decision-making bodies, yet Benue State consistently falls far below this benchmark. In recent elections, the percentage of women who contested and especially those who won was negligible.

Implementing state-level affirmative action through legislated quotas for elective and appointive offices can stimulate progress toward gender parity. Such measures could include reserved seats for women in local government councils and the State House of Assembly. Mandatory representation in political party leadership, and targeted funding or waivers for female aspirants. Affirmative action is not a token gesture but a strategic mechanism to guarantee the representation of diverse voices in democratic processes, thereby fostering more inclusive and equitable governance.

Transforming Political Party Structures for Gender Inclusion

Political parties play a pivotal role as gatekeepers to political leadership and representation. However, in Benue State, party structures remain largely male-controlled, often characterized by token female representation and a lack of genuine commitment to gender equity within internal governance. Most political parties operate without institutionalized frameworks to identify, train, or support female aspirants, with key decisions frequently dominated by male-led caucuses that marginalize women's participation.

To create truly inclusive platforms, party constitutions must be reformed to embed gender-sensitive policies. These should include mandatory quotas for women in executive positions, transparent and equitable nomination procedures, and gender-balanced delegate representation. Beyond structural changes, Women's wings should be empowered with actual decision-making authority, rather than being relegated to ceremonial roles. Structured mentorship programs within parties are also essential for nurturing leadership among emerging female politicians.

Additionally, political parties must confront informal but entrenched barriers that inhibit women's participation. These include financial exclusion, gender-based political violence, and the lack of supportive campaign policies that consider caregiving responsibilities and safety concerns. Addressing these issues is critical to building equitable party systems that not only accommodate but actively promote women's political leadership.

Interlinking the Three Approaches for Sustainable Impact

Policy reforms, affirmative action, and gender-sensitive political party structures should not be pursued in isolation. A holistic and synchronized approach that leverages all three mechanisms offers a more sustainable pathway to transformative change. While policy reforms create the legal foundation, affirmative action provides immediate remedial measures, and political party reforms institutionalize long-term inclusivity.

The synergy among these strategies can dismantle the multifaceted barriers that inhibit women's full participation in politics. For instance, policy reforms can mandate gender quotas that parties must adhere to; parties, in turn, can adopt affirmative action policies that align with state legislation.

While the literature underscores the multifaceted barriers to women's political participation ranging from patriarchal norms, institutional exclusion, and financial constraints to political party structures the specific dynamics of gendered political leadership and representation within sub-national contexts like Benue State remain underexplored. Much of the existing research adopts a national or generalized Nigerian perspective, often overlooking the unique socio-political, ethnic, and cultural configurations that shape women's political agency at the state level.

Although scholars highlight the role of informal institutions and structural discrimination, there is limited empirical evidence examining how Feminist Institutionalism can be applied practically to assess and transform political parties, governance frameworks, and electoral systems within Benue. The literature also tends to focus on descriptive barriers rather than evaluating policy-driven solutions such as gender-responsive budgeting, local-level affirmative action, and institutional reforms tailored to subnational governance realities.

This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by providing a context-specific analysis of women's political leadership and representation in Benue State through the lens of Feminist Institutionalism. It will critically examine how state-level policy environments,

party structures, and informal networks operate to reinforce gendered exclusion, and propose actionable strategies to promote substantive inclusion of women in political leadership.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to gain comprehensive insights. Quantitative data was derived from electoral records and gender audits, while qualitative data was gathered through interviews and focus group discussions.

Study Area

Benue State, located in Nigeria's Middle Belt, comprises 23 Local Government Areas. The state is ethnically diverse, with Tiv and Idoma as the major groups and other minority tribes as Utolo, Igede, and Jukun. Politically, it has witnessed democratic governance but with limited female representation across the state.

Population and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select female politicians, electoral officers, party leaders, and civil society actors. In total, 30 participants were engaged.

Data Collection Instruments

- Semi-structured interviews
- Focus group discussion guides
- Document analysis (INEC reports, political party constitutions)

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to present patterns of women's political representation, while qualitative data gathered through interviews and focus group discussions were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings are presented and discussed below under four thematic areas:

- i. Socio-cultural constraints to women's political participation,
- ii. Party politics and internal democracy,
- iii. Institutional and electoral barriers, and
- iv. Success stories and agency among women leaders.

Discussion of Findings

Socio-Cultural Constraints to Women's Political Participation

A recurring theme in the data is the persistence of patriarchal cultural norms that shape public perceptions and expectations around gender roles. Respondents across

different age groups and localities in Benue State noted that women are commonly viewed as homemakers and moral supporters rather than decision-makers. These entrenched beliefs severely limit their aspirations and opportunities for leadership.

Furthermore, traditional authority systems continue to dominate local governance structures in many communities. Women are often excluded from community deliberations, even in matters that directly affect them. Such norms create a hostile environment for women who dare to pursue political ambitions, reinforcing the idea that leadership is an exclusively male domain.

These findings reinforce the relevance of the Feminist Institutionalism (FI) framework, which emphasizes how informal institutions and gendered expectations intersect with formal political processes to marginalize women.

Party Politics and Internal Democracy

The role of political parties in shaping electoral outcomes emerged as a critical barrier to women's representation. Analysis revealed that party primaries are often influenced by informal patronage systems, which are male-dominated and largely inaccessible to women. Political godfatherism, monetized candidacy processes, and opaque decision-making within parties were cited as key obstacles.

Women aspiring for leadership often face discriminatory selection processes within their parties. Several respondents reported being asked to step down in favor of male candidates or being excluded from internal consultations. The absence of internal gender quotas or clear inclusion policies further entrenches these disadvantages. This theme illustrates how formal party structures and informal political practices collectively institutionalize exclusion, a central tenet of Feminist Institutionalism.

Institutional and Electoral Barriers

Quantitative analysis of the 2023 general elections in Benue State underscores the structural nature of women's underrepresentation:

Position	Total Seats	Women Elected	Percentage
Local Government Council	23	9	39.13%
State House of Assembly	32	2	6.25%
House of Representatives	11	2	18.18%

Senate	3	0	0%
hip Governors	1	0	0%

These figures reveal that despite constitutional guarantees of equal participation, institutional barriers remain deeply embedded. Electoral violence, particularly during campaigns and voting periods, was identified by participants as a major deterrent. Female candidates are often targeted with threats, character assassination, and even physical intimidation.

In addition, economic exclusion plays a major role. Campaign financing is prohibitively expensive, and political fundraising structures are heavily gendered, with women receiving significantly less support. This systemic financial disenfranchisement limits the ability of female aspirants to compete effectively.

Success Stories and Agency Among Women Leaders

Despite the overwhelming challenges, some women in Benue State have managed to navigate the political terrain and assert agency. The few who were elected, particularly at the local council level demonstrated resilience, strategic alliances, and strong community ties.

Interview data revealed that women leaders tend to focus on social welfare, education, healthcare, and grassroots development. Their leadership styles are often participatory and responsive, emphasizing collective problem-solving. Constituents praised female leaders for their transparency, accessibility, and dedication to community needs.

These success stories offer valuable entry points for reform, showing that when women lead, their impact is not only substantive but also transformative. They challenge the narrative of women's political incompetence and highlight the importance of creating enabling structures to scale such examples.

Strategies for Improvement

Participants and literature converge on several strategic recommendations to address the current imbalance:

- **Legislated Gender Quotas:** Enactment of enforceable policies mandating a minimum percentage of female candidates across all political offices.
- **Capacity Building:** Leadership training, political education, and mentorship initiatives targeting young women.

- **Campaign Financing Support:** Establishment of gender-responsive public or donor funding pools to support female candidates.
- **Reform of Political Party Structures:** Institutionalizing internal democracy, setting clear gender inclusion benchmarks, and penalizing discriminatory practices within parties.

Conclusion to Findings Section:

Organizing the findings thematically enables a clearer understanding of the multi-layered barriers and opportunities that define women's political participation in Benue State. By situating these within the Feminist Institutionalism framework, the analysis provides both critical insights into the persistence of gender exclusions and concrete avenues for systemic change.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The gender imbalance in political leadership in Benue State reflects broader national trends and institutionalized patriarchy. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach involving legal reforms, cultural reorientation, and strategic investments in Benue women's untapped political experience and leadership capacities.

Conclusion and Implications for Benue State

Benue State stands at a critical juncture where it can either continue with the status quo or choose a progressive path that prioritizes gender equity in leadership. The urgency for change is heightened by the growing recognition that inclusive governance is essential for social cohesion, equitable development, and democratic sustainability.

To achieve meaningful representation of women in political leadership, Benue must enact deliberate and enforceable policy reforms, embrace affirmative action as a tool for redress, and restructure political party systems to reflect gender sensitivity. These strategies, if effectively implemented and monitored, will not only enhance women's political presence but also enrich the democratic fabric of the state.

The study recommends the implementation of the 35% affirmative action policy at state and local government levels. Also, there is a need to promote civic education targeting gender equality and integrating inclusion and encourage media representation of successful female politicians across the state. Lastly, it is important to strengthen alliances among women's groups to build solidarity and influence.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Female Politicians, Party Leaders, and Civil Society Actors

1. Demographic Information

- i. Age:
- ii. Occupation/Position:
- iii. Years in Political Involvement:

2. Political Representation

- i. How would you describe the current state of women's political representation in Benue State?
- ii. In your experience, what factors encourage or discourage women from participating in politics here?

3. Barriers to Participation

- i. What are the main challenges you or other women face in seeking political office?
- ii. How do cultural and societal norms influence women's political participation?
- iii. Have you experienced or witnessed any political violence or intimidation targeting women candidates?

4. Political Party Dynamics

- i. How supportive are political parties towards female candidates?
- ii. Are there any internal party policies or practices that promote or hinder women's leadership?

5. Impact and Influence

- i. What impact do women political leaders have on governance and community development in Benue State?

- ii. Do women in leadership positions have enough influence to affect policy changes?

6. Strategies for Improvement

- i. What strategies or reforms do you think would increase women's political participation in Benue State?
- ii. How can civil society and government institutions better support aspiring female politicians?

7. Additional Comments

- i. Is there anything else you would like to share about women's political leadership in Benue State?

Appendix B: List of Participants (Anonymized)

Participant ID	Role	Gender	Years of Experience	Area of Focus
P01	Female Politician	Female	8	State Assembly
P02	Party Leader	Male	12	Political Party
P03	Civil Society Activist	Female	5	Gender Advocacy
P04	Electoral Officer	Male	10	INEC
P05	Female Politician	Female	4	Local Government
P06	Political Analyst	Male	7	Governance Research
P07	Female Aspirant	Female	2	Prospective Candidate
P08	Women's Group Leader	Female	9	Women Empowerment
P09	Media Practitioner	Male	6	Political Reporting
P10	Political Party Official	Female	11	Party Administration

Note: All participants' identities have been anonymized to protect confidentiality.

Appendix C: Extract from Benue State Gender Audit Report (2020)

Key Findings:

- Women constitute approximately 49% of the population in Benue State but hold less than 10% of elective political offices.
- Socio-cultural practices limit women's involvement in public decision-making forums, reinforcing traditional gender roles.
- Economic constraints remain a major barrier; 65% of women surveyed reported insufficient financial resources to contest elections.
- Political parties lack clear gender mainstreaming policies; only 15% of party leadership positions are held by women.
- There is a significant gap in political awareness among women, with only 30% having received any form of civic or political education.
- Electoral violence disproportionately affects women candidates, with documented cases of intimidation during the 2019 elections.
- Recommendations include the adoption of gender quotas, increased funding for women candidates, and capacity-building programs targeted at female aspirants.