

Policyweekly

International Women's Day and the Risks of Womanhood in Nigeria



Policy Recommendations

- 1** Governments at national and subnational levels should deepen gender mainstreaming in economic policies and programmes.
- 2** Nigeria's security agencies must design strategies that pay special attention to the protection of vulnerable women in conflict and post-conflict communities.
- 3** The National Assembly and the State Assemblies should make legislation to reserve a certain number of seats and appointive positions for women at the national and sub-national levels.
- 4** Civil Society Organisations should deepen engagement with traditional and religious institutions to address entrenched cultural and religious practices that undermine economic and political opportunities for women in Nigeria.

Introduction

On March 8, 2024, the world commemorated yet another International Women's Day (IWD), with the official United Nations (UN) theme for the 2024 International Women's Day being: "Count Her In: Invest in Women. Accelerate Progress". [Officially adopted by the UN in 1975](#) following a series of protest movements and advocacies, which began in 1908 to pursue emancipation from economic exploitation and political exclusion, the IWD symbolises global recognition of the risks of womanhood and efforts to de-risk womanhood. But what has changed after close to five decades of adopting IWD and its annual commemoration globally? For the woman in Nigeria, being a woman remains scary due to risks of political and economic exclusion, cultural stereotyping, weaponisation of women as instruments of war, and poor recognition of the intersectionality of womanhood in policies and programming, to mention a few. For instance, in the area of politics, with the total number of women in the National Assembly currently below 5% of the total seats in the Assembly, Nigeria ranks as the country with the lowest number of women in parliament across Africa. The recent [mass abductions](#) of about 500 persons, mostly women and girls, by Boko Haram in Gamboru Ngala, Borno State and bandits in

Kaduna State in the first week of March 2024 further demonstrates the everyday risks of being a woman in Nigeria.

Against the backdrop of IWD commemoration, this edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly provides sober reflection and stock-taking on the risks of womanhood in Nigeria and suggests strategies for de-risking womanhood through legislation, policies and programmes that enhance women's political inclusion, economic emancipation and reflect the intersections of women's age, disability, culture, religion and socio-economic status.

The Risks of Womanhood in Nigeria

Close to five decades after the adoption of the IWD by the UN and the annual commemoration of IWD globally, womanhood continues to be at risk in Nigeria. These risks range from the weaponization of women as instruments of violence to political exclusion and economic marginalization.

Weaponization of women as instruments of violence

one of the everyday risks posed to womanhood in Nigeria is the risk of being used as a weapon of violence by various non-state armed groups operating across Nigeria. The situation is worst in the Northeast and Northwest, where insurgents and bandits abduct women for various violence-related reasons, which include provocation of government, retaliation against the government, instruments of negotiation and fundraising, shields from bullets of the military, instruments of sex, etc. Some of the heartrending examples include the abduction of more than [270 school girls](#) in 2014 by Boko Haram from their dormitory in Chibok town, Borno State. Similarly, On February 19, 2018, ISWAP abducted [110 girls](#) when it attacked the Government Girls Science and Technical School in Dapchi, Yobe State, Nigeria. Although 104 returned after five were killed in abduction, one of the girls – [Leah Sharibu](#) – has remained in abduction. Since then, more women have joined Leah Sharibu in the detention of insurgents and bandits. While the world was commemorating the IWD in March 2024, insurgents abducted about 200 people in Borno State and another estimated 200 in Kaduna, mostly women and girls. In the Northcentral and Southern parts of Nigeria, women have remained the prey of violent herders who attack, rape and maim them in the farms.

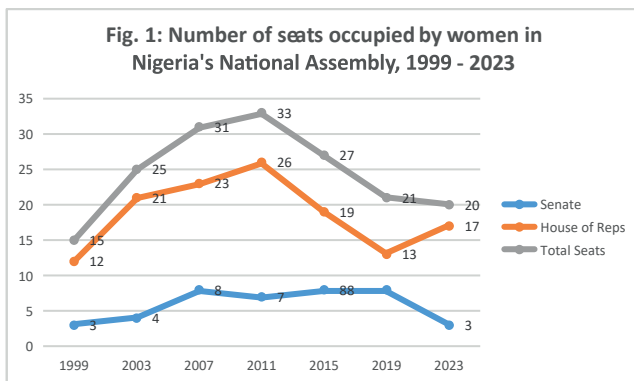
Political exclusion and underrepresentation:

being a woman in Nigeria puts one at the risk of political exclusion and underrepresentation. Even though women constituted [49.5%](#) of Nigeria's population and [47.5%](#) of 93 million registered voters in the just concluded 2023 elections, they are politically excluded

and underrepresented at the national and sub-national levels. Of the [15,307](#) candidates that contested for the 2023 general elections through the eighteen political parties, only 1,553 (10.1%) were women. Results of the 2023 general elections further showed that women occupy [less than 5%](#) of the total number of seats in the 10th Assembly. The Senate has only 3 women representing 2.7% of 109 seats, while the House of Representatives has 17 representing 4.7% of 360 seats. Generally, the last four general elections have witnessed continuous decline in the number of seats occupied by women in the National Assembly as demonstrated in figure 1. Similarly, at the subnational level, only 48 female lawmakers, representing 4.85 per cent, were elected out of the 988 state assembly seats across the 36 states of the federation.

The political exclusion and underrepresentation of women in politics are connected to the systemic factors that have become entrenched in Nigeria's politics. One major factor contributing to the exclusion and underrepresentation of women in politics is the high cost of contesting elections, which puts women in a disadvantaged position. Experts estimate that candidates aspiring to be federal MPs would have to expend as much as N200 million on election campaigning alone (Olorunmola, 2016). This is a very conservative estimate if we consider the costs of all phases of the election, from the cost of nomination and expression of interest (EOI) forms, securing party primaries to contesting the general elections. In the 2023 election cycle, the cost of EOI for presidential aspirants under the All Progressive Congress (APC) was [30 million naira](#), and that of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) was [5 million naira](#) for presidential candidates. Even though many of the parties grant waivers to women candidates, women aspirants must demonstrate significant financial capacity to fund their campaigns before they are given serious attention. This high cost of politics puts women at a disadvantage, given that they are already economically disadvantaged relative to their male counterparts.

High incidence of electoral is another factor that systematically excludes women from political participation. Elections in Nigeria have gained infamy for the high incidence of violence that characterize the pre-election, election and post election phases. During the just concluded 2023 general election, a [statement](#) released by Centre for Democracy and Development showed that a total of 109 election-related deaths were recorded across Nigeria in the pre-election phase of the 2023 general election. Similarly, during the election phase, [report](#) by a Civil Society Organization, Kimpact Development Initiative, revealed that a total of 238 violence and 28 deaths were recorded during the 2023 general elections – 98 of the total violence occurred during the February 25 presidential election, 140 were reported during the March Governorship and State House of Assembly polls.



Source: Compiled from based on data from Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC) and Oluyemi, O. (nd). Monitoring Participation of Women in Politics in Nigeria. https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/Finland_Oct2016/Documents/Nigeria_paper.pdf

Economic marginalisation

The women in Nigeria suffer economic disadvantages due to entrenched cultural factors and weak policies and programming that hardly reflect the intersectionality of women in the economic space. For instance, in the area of agriculture, more than 70% of women contribute to agricultural production. Specifically, women carry out 80% of agricultural production, 60% of agricultural processing and 50% of animal husbandry, yet they have less than 20% of agricultural assets (ActionAid, 2021). This means that women, as economic agents, work so hard but earn so little from their labour. In the agricultural setting, even when women perform the same tasks as men, they are paid lower wages than their male counterparts (Interview with the female farmer). Women also find it difficult to secure credit facilities, especially when landed property is required as collateral. This is because women are less likely to own land compared to their male counterparts due to cultural factors and associated economic disadvantages. Data from the [2018 National Demographic Health Survey](#) showed that in Nigeria, men are more than three times as likely to own a house or land compared to women. In fact, the percentage of women who own land alone or jointly declined from 15% to 12% between 2013 and 2018, while land ownership among men increased from 34% to 38% within the same period.

Together, the weaponisation of women as instruments of violence, their political exclusion and economic marginalisation interact in a vicious circle that deepens the risks of being a woman in Nigeria.

Recommendations: Accelerating Progress Towards De-Risking Womanhood in Nigeria

- 1. Deepen gender mainstreaming in economic policies and programmes:** governments at national and subnational levels should recognise the intersections of women's age, disability, culture,

socio-economic status, etc, in developing and implementing economic development programmes. Agricultural development programmes and other economic empowerment programmes should prioritise the needs of women in terms of the provision of gender-friendly equipment and credit facilities that do not emphasise collaterals that put women at a disadvantage. There are some instances where economic programmes are designed to accommodate women, with some percentages of such intervention assigned to women; however, the implementation of such programmes as designed has always remained a problem. There should be deliberate financial policies that target the informal sector with the aim of assisting women who form the core of the sector of the economy. Such policies should include financial inclusion and loans, support for women's cooperative groups, etc.

- 2. Securitisation of women in conflict and post-conflict communities:** Nigeria's security agencies must design strategies that pay special attention to the protection of vulnerable women in conflict and post-conflict communities. Special protection must be given to women in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps and girls in rural schools through regular surveillance and intelligence gathering. Additionally, security agencies must collaborate with local vigilantes to bolster protection for women in farming communities who are easy targets for killer herdsmen.
- 3. Legislate gender-based quota in elective and appointive positions:** Experiences of countries like Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, and Kenya have shown that making laws to reserve a certain number of seats for women in elective positions mitigates the risk of women's political exclusion. Hence, the National Assembly and the State Assemblies should make legislation to reserve a certain number of seats and appointive positions for women at the national and sub-national levels.
- 3. Deepen engagement with traditional and religious institutions:** Civil Society Organisations should deepen engagement with traditional and religious institutions to address entrenched cultural and religious practices that undermine economic and political opportunities for women in Nigeria.

Conclusion

After over five decades of annual commemoration of IWD globally, not much has changed for the Nigerian woman in terms of gender parity, inclusion and economic empowerment. The Nigerian woman continues to suffer the risks of political and economic exclusion, cultural stereotyping, weaponisation of women as instruments of war, and poor recognition of her intersectionality in state policies and programming. The 2024 IWD provides an opportunity for critical stakeholders to make further commitments on strategies to mitigate these risks through legislation and gendered-focused policies and programming.

Reference

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Authors:

Dr Chukwuma Okoli is an Associate Consultant at Nextier and a Lecturer at the Political Science Department at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

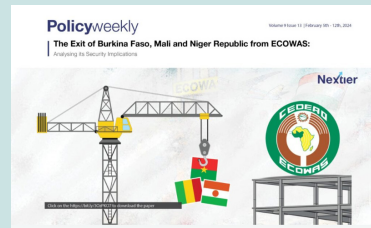
Dr Ndu Nwokolo is a Partner at Nextier and an Honorary Fellow at the School of Government at the University of Birmingham, UK.

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