

Igbo Women's Political Participation in Nigeria: Impact of Underrepresentation on Local and National Policy Outcomes

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Abstract- This article examines Igbo women's political participation in Nigeria, focusing on its effects on policy outcomes at local and national levels. Although women make up around half of Nigeria's population, they hold less than 5 per cent of seats in the federal parliament. Igbo women face even greater marginalisation within the political structures of the South-East region. The study draws on secondary data from the Independent National Electoral Commission and the National Bureau of Statistics, as well as scholarly literature from 1999 to 2025. It uses intersectional feminist theory and the revised National Gender Policy as analytical tools. Findings reveal a paradox: Igbo women excel at grassroots mobilisation and constitute significant voting blocs, yet rarely secure elective or appointive positions. This is due to patriarchal cultural norms, party barriers, and economic exclusion. Their underrepresentation impacts policy. Neglect of women-centric infrastructure, little legislative attention to maternal health and gender-based violence, and a lack of gender perspectives in South-East state budgets are some consequences. From 1999 to 2023, Igbo women held fewer than 4 per cent of National Assembly seats in the South-East, and no female governor has been elected in the five South-East states. The article adds to debates on the gap between participation and representation. It argues that increasing numbers without removing structural barriers leads to "participation without power." The article recommends implementing the Reserved Seats Bill, enforcing the 35 per cent affirmative action, and deliberately including women in party leadership.

Keywords: *Igbo Women, Political Participation, Underrepresentation, Policy Outcomes, Nigeria, Affirmative Action, Gender Equality*

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of women's political participation in Nigeria has, over the past three decades, occupied an increasingly prominent place in both academic

discourse and policy advocacy. This is hardly surprising given the persistent disparity between women's demographic presence, roughly 49 percent of the national population, and their representation in governance structures across all tiers of the Nigerian federation. For the Igbo women of South-East Nigeria, this disjuncture assumes significance, not merely because of their numerical strength within the region, but also owing to a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and contemporary political factors that shape their engagement with formal political processes.

The study of women's political participation in Nigeria has generated a substantial body of scholarship, much of which has focused on national-level patterns or comparative analyses across geopolitical zones (Olayode & Rakubu, 2025; Uzodike & Ojukwu, 2025). However, what remains insufficiently explored is the specific nexus between the underrepresentation of Igbo women and its consequent effects on policy outcomes, both at the local government level where grassroots governance ostensibly occurs, and at the national level where broader legislative frameworks are determined. This lacuna is particularly striking given that the South-East region, despite its reputation for Igbo women's historical activism documented in works such as Chuku's examination of women's political engagement from the 1800s to 2005 (Chuku, 2009), continues to exhibit some of the lowest rates of female political representation in Nigeria.

The present study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by investigating two interrelated questions: first, what factors account for the sustained underrepresentation of Igbo women in political offices across the Fourth Republic? Second, and more consequentially, what are the measurable effects of this underrepresentation on

policy outcomes affecting both women and the broader populace? These questions are pursued through a methodology that relies on secondary data, including electoral records, policy documents, and published research, to construct a comprehensive picture of Igbo women's political participation patterns and their policy implications.

Understanding the relationship between representation and policy outcomes is not merely an academic exercise. As the Institute of Development Studies has recently noted, persistent underrepresentation weakens democratic legitimacy and constrains policy responsiveness (Chiazor, 2026). Where women are absent from decision-making spaces, the likelihood that policies will address women's specific concerns diminishes considerably. This observation resonates with the Igbo context, where state budgets, legislative priorities, and local government development plans have historically paid minimal attention to issues such as maternal health infrastructure, gender-based violence prevention, and economic empowerment programmes targeting women.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualizing Political Participation

The concept of political participation has undergone considerable theoretical refinement since its early formulations in the mid-twentieth century. Appadorai's (1975) classical definition framed participation as involvement in activities aimed at influencing government action, a formulation that captured conventional forms of engagement such as voting and campaigning (Uzodike & Ojukwu, 2025). Subsequent scholarship, however, has expanded this conceptual terrain to encompass a broader range of activities, including grassroots mobilization, civil society engagement, and informal political influence.

For this study, political participation is understood as encompassing both formal participation (voting, standing for election, holding political office) and informal participation (community organizing, advocacy, engagement with traditional governance structures). This inclusive conceptualization is particularly relevant to the Igbo context, where women's political engagement has historically taken forms that do not always align with Western liberal

models of participation. As Chuku's historical analysis demonstrates, Igbo women developed sophisticated systems of political influence, including the *omumu* women's associations and the practice of "sitting on a man", that predated colonial incursion and continued to shape women's political consciousness into the post-independence era (Chuku, 2009).

2.2 Women's Political Participation in Nigeria: Historical Trajectories

The historical arc of women's political participation in Nigeria reveals a pattern of significant mobilization followed by systematic marginalization. During the colonial period, women's movements, most notably the 1929 Aba Women's War, in which Igbo women played a central role, demonstrated the capacity for collective political action that challenged both colonial authority and indigenous patriarchal structures. This tradition of activism continued into the First Republic, with figures such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Margaret Ekpo emerging as prominent voices in the nationalist movement and early post-independence politics (Uzodike & Ojukwu, 2025).

However, the military interventions that punctuated Nigeria's political history from 1966 onward had a profoundly negative effect on women's political participation. Military regimes, characterized by hierarchical command structures and limited institutional space for civil society, offered few avenues for women's political advancement. The transition to democratic governance in 1999 raised expectations that women's participation would increase substantially, expectations that, as subsequent events have shown, remain largely unfulfilled (Ugwuja & Ekpootu, 2023; Olayode & Rakubu, 2025).

2.3 The Igbo Context: Culture, Colonialism, and Contemporary Politics

The specific case of Igbo women requires attention to the cultural and historical particularities that shape their political experiences. Pre-colonial Igbo society operated through a complex system of checks and balances that included significant roles for women in both domestic and public spheres. Women's associations, known variously as *umunwanyi* or *inyemedi*, exercised authority over matters affecting women and could, through collective

action, influence decisions at the village level (Okeke, 2023; Chuku, 2009).

The colonial encounter, however, disrupted these traditional structures while simultaneously creating new opportunities for women's political mobilization. The British policy of indirect rule, which recognized only male warrant chiefs as legitimate intermediaries, undermined women's traditional authority structures, a development that contributed directly to the Aba Women's War of 1929. In the post-independence period, and particularly following the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967-1970), Igbo society experienced further transformations that, according to some scholars, reduced women's political space relative to pre-colonial patterns (Okeke, 2023).

Contemporary Igbo politics is characterized by a paradoxical situation. On one hand, Igbo women participate actively in economic life, dominate certain commercial sectors, and maintain strong associational networks. On the other hand, their formal political representation remains minimal. As one recent study notes, the tradition persists that 'women do not sit with men to discuss the affairs of state', a cultural disposition that finds expression in party politics, electoral processes, and governance structures (Okeke, 2023).

2.4 The Participation-Representation Nexus

A significant strand of scholarly literature addresses the distinction between political participation and political representation, a distinction that has relevance for understanding the Igbo case. Participation, as noted earlier, encompasses a wide range of political activities, while representation refers specifically to the presence of women in decision-making positions. Recent research has demonstrated that Nigerian women do not suffer from a participation deficit per se; they are central to grassroots mobilization and constitute over half of the voting population during elections (Chiazor, 2026). The challenge, rather, lies in converting this participation into representation.

This participation-representation gap is evident across Nigeria, but it assumes characteristics in the Igbo context. Studies of political behaviour in the South-East have documented high levels of women's

electoral participation, they vote in large numbers, campaign actively for candidates, and contribute financially to political processes. Yet, as the data presented in this article demonstrate, their presence in elective offices remains disproportionately low (Usman & Zuwaira, 2025; Otu, 2025). This disconnect suggests that the barriers to women's representation operate at the level of candidate selection, party structures, and electoral competition, rather than at the level of voter participation.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by two complementary theoretical perspectives: intersectionality theory and the framework provided by Nigeria's revised National Gender Policy (2021-2026). The choice of these frameworks reflects the need to account for both the multiple, intersecting dimensions of Igbo women's marginalization and the policy environment within which efforts to address this marginalization are situated.

3.1 Intersectional Feminist Theory

Intersectionality theory was developed in the late 1980s by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality refers to how different systems of oppression, such as patriarchy (a social system in which men hold primary power), class exploitation (unfair treatment of people based on their socioeconomic status), and ethnic discrimination (unjust treatment based on ethnicity), intersect to produce unique experiences of marginalisation. Building on this idea, intersectional feminism focuses on individuals who experience overlapping forms of oppression, aiming to understand the depth of inequalities and how they relate to one another. Crenshaw, who coined the term in 1989, described intersectional feminism as "a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other," and noted, "All inequality is not created equal." (Crenshaw, 2020; Pleasure, n.d.) This perspective shows how people's social identities can overlap, resulting in compounded discrimination. As Crenshaw explained, "We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality, or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum

of its parts.” (Crenshaw, 2020; Pleasure, n.d.) Recognising these intersecting identities also requires considering the historical context of an issue. Long histories of violence and systematic discrimination have created deep inequities that disadvantage some from the outset. These inequalities, such as poverty, caste systems (rigid social stratification based on hereditary status), racism (prejudice or discrimination based on race), and sexism (prejudice or discrimination based on sex), intersect to deny people their rights and opportunities, with impacts that extend across generations (Pleasure, n.d). For Igbo women seeking political participation, these intersecting forces manifest in complex ways. Gender operates alongside ethnic identity, class position, and geographical location (rural versus urban) to shape the opportunities and constraints they encounter.

The utility of intersectionality for this study lies in its capacity to move beyond single-axis analyses that attribute Igbo women's underrepresentation solely to cultural factors or solely to structural barriers. Instead, it enables an examination of how cultural norms interact with political party structures, how economic marginalization intersects with gender discrimination, and how regional political dynamics compound the effects of patriarchy. This perspective is particularly valuable for understanding why affirmative action policies, which often assume a uniform category of "women," may fail to address the specific circumstances of Igbo women, particularly those in rural areas (Ugwuja & Ekpootu, 2023; Olayode & Rakubu, 2025).

3.2 Revised National Gender Policy Framework (2021-2026)

Nigeria's Revised National Gender Policy (rNGP) provides the second theoretical anchor for this study. Adopted in 2021 to replace the 2006 policy, the rNGP establishes a comprehensive framework for promoting gender equality across all sectors of Nigerian society. Of particular relevance to this study is the policy's emphasis on the 35 percent affirmative action target for women's representation in governance and its articulation of strategies for achieving this target (Chiazor, 2026; Uzodike & Ojukwu, 2025).

The rNGP's framework is useful for analyzing the gap between policy commitments and implementation outcomes. As the policy itself acknowledges, previous efforts to increase women's political participation have been undermined by implementation deficits, weak enforcement mechanisms, and the absence of consequences for non-compliance. Applying the rNGP framework to the Igbo case allows for an assessment of whether, and to what extent, the policy's provisions have translated into meaningful improvements in women's representation and policy outcomes.

The two theoretical frameworks together provide a robust analytical lens. Intersectionality illuminates the complexity of barriers facing Igbo women, while the rNGP framework offers a standard against which policy implementation can be assessed. Neither framework, taken alone, would adequately capture the nuances of the Igbo case; their combination, however, enables a more comprehensive analysis.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, drawing on secondary data from multiple sources to construct a comprehensive picture of Igbo women's political participation and its effects on policy outcomes. The reliance on secondary data is appropriate given the study's focus on patterns spanning the Fourth Republic (1999-2025) and its interest in policy effects that require analysis of legislative outputs, budgetary allocations, and governance outcomes.

4.1 Data Sources

Data for this study were derived from several categories of sources. Electoral data were obtained from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) official records, including final lists of candidates for National Assembly elections and State Houses of Assembly elections from 1999 to 2023. These data provide the basis for the quantitative analysis of women's representation presented in Table 1.

Policy data were drawn from the Revised National Gender Policy document, state-level policy frameworks from South-East states, and legislative

records from the National Assembly. Published research constituted a third category of sources, with priority given to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and research reports published by Nigerian scholars and Nigerian-focused research institutions. Key sources include work by Ette and Akpan-Obong (2023) on female participation and representation (Olayode & Rakubu, 2025), Idike and colleagues (2020) on gender and national development (Olayode & Rakubu, 2025), and recent publications from the Institute of Development Studies on the Reserved Seats Bill (Chiazor, 2026).

4.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through several stages. Quantitative data on women's representation were compiled into tables and analyzed using descriptive statistics to establish baseline patterns of underrepresentation. Qualitative data from policy documents, legislative records, and published research were subjected to thematic analysis, with themes emerging inductively from the data as well as being informed by the theoretical framework. The analysis sought to identify not only patterns of representation (or its absence) but also the mechanisms through

which underrepresentation translates into policy outcomes.

4.3 Limitations

The reliance on secondary data imposes certain limitations on the study. Official electoral data, while authoritative, may undercount informal political participation and fail to capture the full range of women's political engagement. Similarly, policy documents reflect formal commitments that may not align with actual implementation. To mitigate these limitations, the study triangulates across multiple sources and pays attention to the distinction between policy rhetoric and implementation reality.

V. FINDINGS

5.1 Patterns of Representation: Quantitative Overview

The quantitative data on Igbo women's political representation across the Fourth Republic reveal a pattern of persistent underrepresentation that shows little evidence of substantial improvement over time. Table 1 presents data on women's representation in the National Assembly from South-East states between 1999 and 2023.

Table 1: Women's Representation in the National Assembly from South-East States (1999-2023)

Election Year	Senate (SE)	Women Senators (SE)	% Women	House of Reps (SE)	Women Reps (SE)	% Women
1999	15	0	0.0	42	1	2.4
2003	15	1	6.7	42	2	4.8
2007	15	1	6.7	42	2	4.8
2011	15	0	0.0	42	1	2.4
2015	15	1	6.7	42	2	4.8
2019	15	1	6.7	42	2	4.8
2023	15	1	6.7	42	2	4.8

Source: Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Official Records, various years

The data in Table 1 reveal several notable patterns. First, women's representation in the Senate from the South-East has never exceeded one senator in any election cycle, representing 6.7 percent of the region's senatorial seats. Second, representation in the House of Representatives has fluctuated between one and two members, never exceeding 4.8 percent of the region's seats. Third, there is no discernible upward trend over the 24-year period; representation in 2023 remains at the same level as in 2003.

The situation at the state level is equally concerning. Table 2 presents data on women's representation in State Houses of Assembly across the five South-East states for the 2023 election cycle.

Table 2: Women in State Houses of Assembly by South-East State (2023)

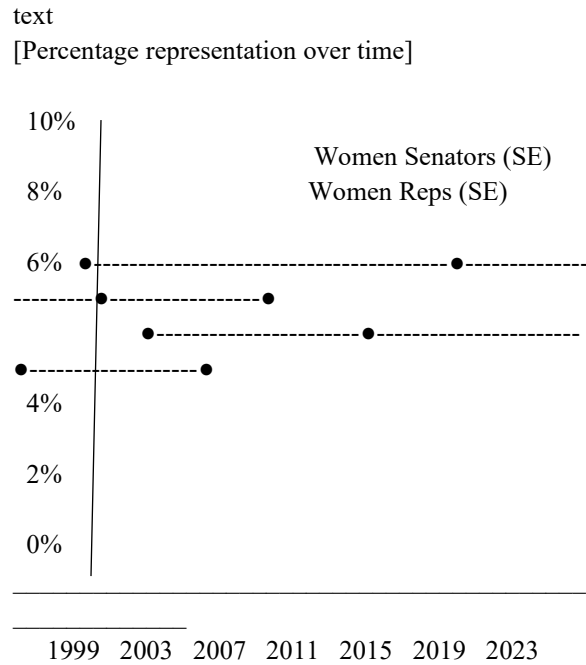
State	Total Seats	Women Members	Percentage
Abia	24	1	4.2
Anambra	30	2	6.7
Ebonyi	24	0	0.0
Enugu	24	1	4.2
Imo	27	1	3.7
Total	129	5	3.9

Source: Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), 2023 General Election Results

The data show that across the five South-East states, women hold only 5 out of 129 State House of Assembly seats, a representation rate of 3.9 percent. Ebonyi State has no women in its State Assembly at all. These figures are consistent with national patterns documented by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which ranks Nigeria among the ten lowest countries worldwide in women's parliamentary representation (Chiazor, 2026).

Perhaps even more striking than legislative representation is the complete absence of Igbo women from executive positions. Since 1999, no woman has served as governor of any of the five South-East states. The position of deputy governor has been held by women in some states, but such appointments have been sporadic rather than systematic. At the local government level, representation is similarly minimal, with studies documenting 0 percent representation of women as local government chairpersons in some states across extended periods (Usman & Zuwaira, 2025).

Figure 1: Trends in Igbo Women's Political Representation (1999-2023)



Source: Author's compilation from INEC data

As Figure 1 illustrates, the representation of Igbo women in the National Assembly has remained essentially flat across the Fourth Republic, with only minor fluctuations that do not constitute meaningful progress. This pattern of stagnation is particularly notable given that it occurs during a period of significant international attention to gender equality and the adoption of multiple policy frameworks aimed at increasing women's participation.

5.2 Factors Contributing to Underrepresentation

The quantitative patterns described above reflect a complex array of factors that operate at multiple

levels. Drawing on the secondary literature and policy analyses, this study identifies four categories of factors contributing to Igbo women's underrepresentation: structural-institutional, cultural-societal, socio-economic, and political party-related.

5.2.1 Structural-Institutional Factors

The architecture of Nigeria's electoral system presents significant barriers to women's political participation. The first-past-the-post electoral system, combined with the high cost of campaigning and the dominance of incumbency, creates conditions that disadvantage women candidates. Women seeking elective office must compete in a system where incumbency advantage is particularly pronounced, an advantage that women, having been historically excluded from office, cannot access (Nkwede & Obani, 2025; Chiazor, 2026).

The Revised National Gender Policy (2021-2026) acknowledges these structural barriers and proposes various remedies, including the establishment of a Gender and Equal Opportunities Commission and the adoption of special measures such as reserved seats. However, the implementation of these provisions has been inconsistent at best. The Reserved Seats Bill, which would create additional legislative seats to be contested by women, passed its second reading in July 2024 but has not yet been operationalized (Chiazor, 2026).

5.2.2 Cultural-Societal Factors

Cultural norms and attitudes toward women in politics constitute a second category of barriers. Research on Igbo society has documented the persistence of patriarchal attitudes that view politics as a male domain. The traditional Igbo saying that "women do not sit with men to discuss the affairs of state" continues to influence contemporary political practice, manifesting in expectations that women should support male candidates rather than contest for office themselves (Okeke, 2023).

These cultural attitudes are reinforced by religious institutions, which in many Igbo communities have become increasingly conservative in their gender ideologies. The combination of traditional cultural norms and conservative religious teachings creates a formidable barrier to women's political

aspirations (Nkwede & Obani, 2025; Olayode & Rakubu, 2025).

5.2.3 Socio-Economic Factors

The financial demands of Nigerian politics constitute a particularly acute barrier for women candidates. Contesting for elective office in Nigeria requires substantial financial resources, which many women, particularly those outside established political families, cannot access. Political parties rarely provide financial support to women candidates, and women's relatively limited access to capital, land, and other economic resources puts them at a significant disadvantage (Olayode & Rakubu, 2025; Usman & Zuwaira, 2025).

The intersection of gender with class and geography is particularly relevant here. Research has shown that the limited number of women who do hold political office tend to come from urban, educated, and economically privileged backgrounds. Rural women, who constitute the majority of the female population in South-East Nigeria, are almost entirely excluded from formal political representation (Ugwuja & Ekpootu, 2023).

5.2.4 Political Party Factors

Political parties, which serve as gatekeepers to elective office, exhibit significant gender biases in their candidate selection processes. Studies of party behaviour in Nigeria have documented the marginalization of women within party structures, the assignment of women to "unwinnable" constituencies, and the lack of enforcement of party policies that nominally support women's participation (Olayode & Rakubu, 2025; Nkwede & Obani, 2025).

The internal organization of political parties reflects and reinforces patriarchal norms. Party leadership positions are overwhelmingly held by men, and the informal networks through which candidates are selected often exclude women. Even when party constitutions include provisions for women's representation, these provisions are frequently ignored in practice.

5.3 Effects of Underrepresentation on Policy Outcomes

The central concern of this study is the relationship between Igbo women's underrepresentation and policy

outcomes. The analysis suggests that this relationship operates through multiple mechanisms and yields identifiable consequences.

5.3.1 Policy Neglect of Women-Centric Issues

Perhaps the most direct effect of underrepresentation is the relative neglect of policy issues that disproportionately affect women. Analysis of legislative outputs from the National Assembly and South-East State Houses of Assembly reveals limited attention to issues such as maternal health, gender-based violence, and women's economic empowerment.

Maternal health provides a telling example. South-East Nigeria continues to record maternal mortality rates that, while lower than some other regions, remain unacceptably high. Yet legislative attention to maternal health infrastructure, skilled birth attendance, and emergency obstetric care has been sporadic. Budgetary allocations to health sectors in South-East states consistently fall below the Abuja Declaration target of 15 percent, and within health budgets, maternal health services are often underfunded relative to other priorities.

5.3.2 Absence of Gender-Responsive Budgeting

A second policy effect relates to the absence of gender-responsive budgeting at both state and local government levels. Gender-responsive budgeting, which involves analyzing budgets for their differential impacts on women and men and allocating resources to address gender inequalities, has been adopted in some Nigerian states but not in South-East states.

The absence of gender-responsive budgeting means that state budgets are developed without systematic attention to how resources might be deployed to address gender inequalities. Infrastructure projects, for example, are often planned without considering women's specific needs for safety, accessibility, and proximity to domestic responsibilities. The result is a pattern of resource allocation that, whether by design or default, perpetuates gender inequalities.

5.3.3. Limitations of Affirmative Action Implementation

A third policy effect concerns the limitations of affirmative action implementation. The 35 percent affirmative action target, while officially adopted, has

not been systematically enforced. Analysis of appointments to executive positions in South-East states reveals that women rarely exceed 15 percent of cabinet positions, and even this level is achieved inconsistently.

The gap between policy commitment and implementation has significant consequences. When affirmative action targets are treated as aspirational rather than mandatory, there is little incentive for political leaders to prioritize women's appointments. The result is a pattern in which women's representation depends on the personal commitment of individual leaders rather than on systematic institutional mechanisms.

Table 3: Women in Executive Appointments by South-East State (2023)

State	Cabinet Positions	Women in Cabinet	Percentage
Abia	18	2	11.1
Anambra	20	3	15.0
Ebonyi	17	1	5.9
Enugu	19	3	15.8
Imo	18	2	11.1

Source: State Government Official Gazettes, 2023

Table 3 shows that women's representation in state cabinets across the South-East ranges from 5.9 percent in Ebonyi to 15.8 percent in Enugu. None of the states meet the 35 percent affirmative action target, and the average representation (11.8 percent) falls far short of this goal.

5.3.4 Democratic Legitimacy and Governance Quality

Beyond specific policy outputs, the underrepresentation of Igbo women has broader implications for democratic legitimacy and governance quality. As the Institute of Development

Studies has argued, persistent underrepresentation weakens democratic legitimacy and constrains policy responsiveness (Chiazor, 2026). When significant segments of the population are excluded from decision-making processes, the democratic credentials of the system are compromised.

Research on governance quality suggests that more inclusive decision-making processes produce better outcomes across a range of indicators. The absence of women's perspectives from policy debates means that important insights, experiences, and priorities are excluded from consideration. This is particularly consequential in areas such as education, health, and social welfare, where women's experiences and expertise are directly relevant.

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings presented above invite several lines of discussion that engage with ongoing scholarly debates and point toward implications for policy and practice.

6.1 Participation without Power

A central insight emerging from this study is the phenomenon that might be termed "participation without power", the situation in which women participate actively in political processes (voting, campaigning, grassroots organizing) but remain excluded from decision-making positions. This phenomenon, which is evident in the Igbo case, challenges simplistic narratives that equate political participation with political influence.

The participation-without-power phenomenon has significant implications for how we conceptualize and measure women's political engagement. Traditional measures of political participation that focus on voting rates or campaign activities may overstate women's political inclusion if they do not also account for representation in decision-making structures. The Igbo case suggests that high levels of participation can coexist with minimal representation, a finding that complicates optimistic accounts of women's political progress.

6.2 The Limitations of Voluntarist Approaches

The findings also highlight the limitations of voluntarist approaches to increasing women's

representation. Efforts to "encourage" women to participate in politics, while valuable, are insufficient when structural barriers remain intact. As one recent analysis noted, when representation does not follow participation, political apathy deepens, and calls to merely "encourage" participation risk overlooking structural constraints (Chiazor, 2026).

The implication is that increasing women's representation requires more than individual-level interventions. It requires institutional reforms that address the structural barriers embedded in candidate selection processes, party hierarchies, campaign financing, and electoral competition. The Reserved Seats Bill represents one such institutional response, but its slow progress through the legislative process illustrates the challenges of achieving structural reform in contexts where existing power holders benefit from the status quo.

6.3 The Urban-Rural Divide

A further dimension of the Igbo case that merits discussion is the urban-rural divide in women's political participation and representation. Research has shown that the limited number of women who do hold political office tend to come from urban, educated, and economically privileged backgrounds (Ugwuja & Ekpootu, 2023). Rural women, who constitute the majority of the female population in South-East Nigeria, are almost entirely excluded from formal political representation.

This urban-rural divide has significant implications for policy outcomes. When representation is confined to urban elites, the policy concerns of rural women, issues such as agricultural extension services, rural infrastructure, and access to markets, may be neglected. The intersectionality framework developed earlier is particularly useful for analyzing how gender, class, and geographical location combine to produce patterns of exclusion that are not captured by gender analysis alone.

6.4 Revisiting the National Gender Policy

The findings also invite a critical assessment of the Revised National Gender Policy (2021-2026) as a framework for addressing women's underrepresentation. The policy's provisions are comprehensive and reflect international best practices,

but its implementation has been inconsistent. The gap between policy rhetoric and implementation reality is particularly evident in the South-East, where state governments have not adopted or enforced the policy's provisions.

This implementation gap raises questions about the effectiveness of policy frameworks that lack enforcement mechanisms. The Revised National Gender Policy, like its predecessor, relies on voluntary compliance by state governments and political parties, a reliance that has not produced the desired results. Strengthening the policy would require the establishment of enforcement mechanisms, including consequences for non-compliance, and the allocation of resources to support implementation.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the political participation of Igbo women in Nigeria and analyzed the effects of their underrepresentation on policy outcomes at local and national levels. The findings reveal a pattern of persistent underrepresentation that shows no substantial improvement over the 24 years of the Fourth Republic. Igbo women hold less than 5 percent of National Assembly seats from the South-East, less than 4 percent of State House of Assembly seats, and no executive positions at the state level. This underrepresentation reflects a complex interplay of structural-institutional, cultural-societal, socio-economic, and political party factors.

The effects of underrepresentation on policy outcomes are significant and multifaceted. They include the neglect of women-centric issues in legislative and policy processes, the absence of gender-responsive budgeting, the limited implementation of affirmative action provisions, and broader consequences for democratic legitimacy and governance quality. These findings suggest that the relationship between representation and policy outcomes is not merely a matter of descriptive representation but has substantive implications for the quality of governance and the well-being of the population.

Addressing Igbo women's underrepresentation requires a multi-pronged approach that goes beyond voluntarist calls for increased participation.

Institutional reforms, including the operationalization of the Reserved Seats Bill, the enforcement of the 35 percent affirmative action target, and the integration of women into party leadership structures, are essential. Additionally, efforts to address cultural attitudes toward women in politics must be sustained and linked to broader campaigns for gender equality.

The case of Igbo women illustrates broader challenges facing women's political participation in Nigeria and, indeed, across Africa. While women's grassroots mobilization remains strong, the translation of participation into representation remains elusive. Addressing this challenge requires not only policy frameworks but also political will to implement them, a will that, to date, has been in short supply.

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