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WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN POLITICS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NIGERIA AND RWANDA

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Abstract

Women make up roughly half of the world's population but held only 27.5 per cent of seats in national parliaments in January 2026. Africa has both the global leader and one of the weakest performers. Rwanda's Chamber of Deputies is 63.8 per cent female. In Nigeria, women held 3.6 per cent of National Assembly seats when the 10th Assembly was inaugurated in 2023. Studies of Nigeria mostly explain under-representation through culture, religion, money and women's own reluctance. Studies of Rwanda mostly either praise its numbers or question whether those numbers bring substantive change. Few studies compare the two countries on one clearly defined institutional variable using recent, harmonised data. This paper compares the legal and electoral mechanisms for women's inclusion in Nigeria and Rwanda, namely constitutional quotas, reserved seats and the electoral system. It then assesses how far those mechanisms account for the gap in women's parliamentary representation. The analysis draws on liberal feminist theory and feminist institutionalism, and is supported by the principles of participatory democracy. The study uses a qualitative comparative case-study design with descriptive statistics. Data come from Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) records, the 2025 Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Index, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) candidate data, constitutional and policy documents, court records and peer-reviewed studies covering 1999–2025. Over five elections between 2003 and 2024, women averaged 58.8 per cent of Rwanda's lower house. Over seven assemblies between 1999 and 2023, women averaged 5.1 per cent of Nigeria's National Assembly. Rwanda's 30 per cent constitutional floor is enforced through 24 reserved seats and closed-list proportional representation. Above that floor, women won 27 of the 56 seats not reserved for them in 2024. Nigeria's 35 per cent target is a non-binding policy. It operates in a first-past-the-post system, and the National Assembly rejected reserved-seat bills in 2016 and 2022 and had still not passed a successor bill by mid-2026. However, Rwanda's lead in parliament does not carry over evenly into other areas: it ranks 121st of 181 countries on the WPS Index. This suggests that quotas secure descriptive representation more reliably than they secure broader gender equality. The study concludes that enforceable legal mechanisms are the most important difference between the two countries. It recommends that Nigeria pass the Special Seats Bill, domesticate the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and require parties to meet candidate quotas.

Keywords: women's political representation; gender quotas; electoral systems; feminist institutionalism; Nigeria; Rwanda

Introduction

The global picture

The principles of gender equality in political decision-making are an international promise that has been upheld for a long time. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted by the Governments in 1995. It was at that time that Critical Area G recommended that women be given equal access to and participate fully in power structures and decision making processes (United Nations, 1995). Twenty years later this goal was reiterated in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.5. It is calling on the countries to achieve gender parity in political decision-making processes at all levels and ensure women's full and effective participation, and equal opportunities for leadership, by 2030 (United Nations General Assembly, 2015).

The development has been slow and limited. As of 1 January 2026, women had a total of 27.5 per cent in parliament worldwide, a mere 0.3 percentage point increase from 1 January

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2025 (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2026). Only seven countries had parity or a female majority in the lower or single house, Rwanda being one of the countries (IPU, 2026). UN Women (2025), reports that on 1st January 2025, women accounted for 22.9 per cent of cabinet positions in the executive branch, slightly down from 23.0 per cent in the previous year. Comparative analysis also reveals that the design of institutions has an impact in the IPU, as demonstrated by the evidence. In 2025, the average of the chambers that had legislated quotas was 30.9 per cent women, compared to 23.3 per cent of the chambers without legislated quotas (IPU, 2026).

The African picture

There are also some commitments that are specific to Africa. Under the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), States Parties are obliged to take measures to promote the equal participation of women in politics, including by affirmative action and enabling measures. Agenda 2063 links good governance, democracy, human rights, justice and the rule of law (Aspiration 3) with people-driven development, tapping into the potential of women and youth (Aspiration 6) through the African Union Commission (2015). According to the Africa Barometer on women's political participation, these commitments can only be measured and monitored based on country-level evidence of gaps and progress (International IDEA, 2021).

Sub-Saharan Africa's record is similar to the world average. The mean proportion of women in parliament is 24.5 per cent in sub-Saharan African countries and 23.5 per cent in all countries indexed in the 2025 WPS Index (GIWPS and PRIO, 2025). However, there are very large differences in the countries that are hidden when using the regional average. Rwanda has the highest number of women in a lower house in the world. Nigeria is one of the least developed countries in the world, with Africa being the most populous country in the world.

The local problem: Nigeria

Nigeria reverted to civilian rule in 1999. Women have never made it to 8 per cent of the National Assembly seats since then. The figure was around 7.5 per cent in 2007 but dropped to 3.6 per cent at the June 2023 swearing-in of the 10th Assembly. There were 3 female senators at that time, and 14 female representatives in the House of Representatives (Kartay, 2025; GIWPS & PRIO, 2025). The number of petitioned seats were later raised to 4 senatorial seats and 16 representative seats, representing a total of 4.3 per cent, before the election (Eboesomi, 2026).

The 2025 Global Gender Gap Report ranks Nigeria 124th of 148 economies overall and 143rd on political empowerment, where Nigeria scores 3.6 per cent (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2025, as reported by Olofinko, 2025). These outcomes persist despite several formal commitments:

The National Gender Policy of 2006, revised for 2021–2026, sets a target of 35 per cent women in elective and appointive positions (Tyessi, 2023).

On 6 April 2022, the Federal High Court in Abuja, presided over by Justice Donatus Okorowo, ordered the Federal Government to implement the 35 per cent affirmative action target (Channels Television, 2022).

In 2017, the CEDAW Committee observed that the 35 per cent quota "lack[s] a legislative basis that would ensure [its] enforcement." It recommended temporary special measures, including quotas for political appointments (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW Committee], 2017, paras. 19–20, 29–30).

In short, Nigeria has a policy target and a court order, but no statutory or constitutional mechanism that would compel parties or the state to meet them.

Statement of the problem, research gap and argument

Previous literatures on Nigeria have shed light on the exclusion of women primarily due to culture, religion, lack of education, money politics and resistance of women to contest (Agbalajobi, 2010; Umukoro, 2014; Akindele & Dunmade, 2020). The debate over writing in Rwanda comes in two streams. One is dedicated to its numbers (UN Women Africa, 2017; Maier, 2019). The other question is whether those figures have brought real change in the lives of ordinary women (Burnet, 2008; Debusschere & Ansoms, 2013; Berry, 2015).

This literature leaves three gaps that this paper addresses:

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Few studies compare Nigeria and Rwanda on a single, clearly defined institutional variable. Much existing comparison simply sets the two countries' figures side by side without explaining the difference.

Comparisons often rely on old or inconsistent figures, such as the frequently repeated claim that women hold 61.25 per cent of seats in Rwanda. They rarely use recent harmonised datasets such as the 2025 WPS Index or current IPU records.

The Nigerian debate has not resolved whether the main obstacle is cultural, which would imply long-term attitude change, or institutional, which would imply legal reform that can take effect within one electoral cycle.

This paper suggests that the main institutional distinction between the two countries is the difference in institutional structures. Rwanda has a binding quota in its constitution with reserved seats and List proportional representation. Nigeria has a non-binding policy target in a first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. The cultural barriers are there in both countries but in Rwanda, they are overcome by design; in Nigeria, by design. However, the paper accepts the warning that the critical literature gives about Rwanda's numbers failing to bring equality about in all aspects of women's lives.

Objectives and research questions

The general objective is to compare women's parliamentary representation in Nigeria and Rwanda through the variable of legal and electoral mechanisms for inclusion. The specific objectives are to:

describe trends in women's legislative representation in Nigeria (1999–2023) and Rwanda (2003–2024);

compare the constitutional, statutory and electoral mechanisms in the two countries that govern women's access to parliament;

assess whether Rwanda's high descriptive representation corresponds to wider gender-equality outcomes; and

draw evidence-based lessons for Nigeria.

The study is guided by one question: to what extent do differences in legal and electoral mechanisms explain the gap in women's parliamentary representation between Nigeria and Rwanda?

Conceptual Clarification

Political participation covers the activities through which citizens seek to influence who governs and what government does, including voting, campaigning, party work and contesting for office (Verba et al., 1995). Representation is a narrower idea. Pitkin (1967) distinguishes three forms:

whether legislators resemble the people they represent, for example by sex;

whether legislators act in the interests of the represented; and

whether citizens feel represented.

The distinction matters for this paper. Women in Nigeria participate actively as voters and party mobilisers, yet they are seldom chosen as candidates for winnable seats. This study measures descriptive representation, meaning the share of seats women hold. It treats substantive outcomes as a separate question addressed in Section 6.4.

Gender refers to socially constructed roles, expectations and power relations attached to being male or female, as opposed to biological sex (Connell & Pearse, 2015). Gender arrangements are made by societies, so they can be changed. Policy and law are among the main instruments for changing them.

Krook (2009) identifies three types of quota:

a set number of seats that only women can win;

a legal requirement that parties nominate a minimum share of women; and

targets that parties adopt for themselves.

Quotas are effective only when they suit the electoral system and carry sanctions for non-compliance (Krook, 2009).

Empirical Review and Critique

This section reviews empirical studies on each country and evaluates each strand of evidence rather than simply summarising it.

Studies on Nigeria

The main causes of exclusion of women from Nigerian politics according to Agbalajobi (2010), Umukoro (2014) and Akindele and Dunmade (2020) include patriarchy, religious norms and limited female education. Kelly (2019) collates the broader evidence and includes political violence and the exorbitant expenses of campaigning. Critique: These studies are right on the money with their identification of constraints on female candidates. Most of them are, however,

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descriptive or normative, and do not make predictions using outcome data. They also are not able to explain why Nigeria has much lower performance than other African countries having similar patriarchal and religious attributes, including Senegal (41.2 per cent women in parliament) and Kenya (24.6 per cent) (GIWPS & PRIO, 2025). If it would be enough to have a culture, these differences would not be so prominent.

In 2016 and 2019, 25 female politicians and 10 male allies were interviewed by Ette and Akpan -Obong (2023). They uncovered four recurring obstacles: first, the bullying from "godfathers," second, patriarchal party structures, financial costs, and a "politics of insult." They also discovered that women negotiate access via alliances with men, via deference to party leaders and via grassroots service. Critique: This study is better than previous research because it relies on the women's own voice to support the argument. It does not include however two geopolitical zones in the north for security considerations, and those zones have the lowest female candidations. The results of its work are likely to underestimate the barriers, however.

Nkereuwem (2023) analysed candidate lists for the 2023 elections. More than 15,000 candidates, with women accounting for about 10 per cent, 1,544 female candidates compared to 13,725 male candidates. Approximately 90 per cent of female candidates ran on small parties without much prospect of victory. The main parties established very high nomination fees, including the APC presidential form which costs ₦30 million. There were also significant differences between regions in terms of female candidates, as there were 2 per cent in Kano, and 16 per cent in Lagos. According to Adanikin (2022), only 8.4 per cent (92) of the 1,100 Senate candidates that competed were women. Critique: This evidence contradicts the notion that women do not work hard enough (as supported by the previous version of this paper and much comment). Evidence rather suggests a demand-side issue: that women are not nominated for winnable seats. This is an institutional issue which can be regulated by law.

Kartay (2025) has attributed the absence of progress in women's representation in the National Assembly in the period 1999 to 2023 to the male dominance of party executives and primaries. Using a supply and demand model, Ogunbodede and Akinyetun (2026) examine 42 documents. They believe that the single-member FPTP electoral system, coupled with godfatherism and electoral violence, is in itself a structural disadvantage for women in Nigeria. They also state that none of the members of the 9th Assembly was re-elected among women. Critique: Both studies lay the groundwork for moving the debate towards the institutions, and this paper does the same. Both of those, however, are based on secondary sources, and provide differing seat counts. For instance, Ogunbodede and Akinyetun are each represented by a woman in the 2023 Assembly with 15 and 17 women, respectively. Neither is Nigeria compared to a case where the institutional variable varies. This comparison is what the current study brings.

Studies on Rwanda

Hughes and Tripp (2015) analysed African countries between 1985 and 2010. They discovered that the conclusion of significant civil wars was linked to a sharp increase in women's legislative representation, which was primarily via the implementation of quotas. The increases are explained by Tripp (2015) by the disruption of gender relations in times of conflict, the rise in women's movements and the influence of international norms. Bauer and Burnet (2013) compared two countries, one democratic (Botswana) with no quota, and the other authoritarian (Rwanda) with a quota, and few women in parliament compared to a high number of women in parliament. They found that it is the quotas themselves, not democracy per se, that engender descriptive representation. Critique: These studies are used to buttress this paper's institutional argument. They note, however, that in Rwanda, "post-conflict windows" and the fact that a single party was able to dominate the political landscape allowed quotas to be more easily implemented there than in a politically competitive multi-party federal system like Nigeria. This difference needs to be taken into consideration during lessons learned from Rwanda.

Devlin and Elgie (2008) spoke to Rwandan parliamentarians. They studied that the presence of more women in parliament changed the culture of the chamber and also broadened its agenda, but did not have much impact on policy output on their own as the executive retained its dominance. However, Burnet (2008) claimed that a greater share of women in the legislature could coexist with a lesser real power for women in an

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authoritarian context. Manners of ordinary females did report an increase in "respect and voice" – a symbolic gain – in later fieldwork, however (Burnet 2011). Debusschere and Ansoms (2013) and Berry (2015) contend that Rwanda's gender policies are largely bottom-up and image oriented and that women's lives in rural areas are faring much better in practice than the numbers reflect. Critique: This critical literature is convincing, but it can be interpreted as suggesting that there is no point in having quotas. The conclusion is not necessarily drawn. These studies demonstrate that quotas are not enough and are a different claim. Some of the Rwandan evidence is also older than 10 years. As a result, in Section 6.4 the "numbers without broader equality" claim is re-tested with indicators for 2025.

The gap

Across both bodies of work, three weaknesses stand out. Nigerian studies identify barriers but seldom test whether institutional design explains the size of the gap. Rwandan studies explain how women's numbers rose, but are rarely applied to the design problems of a large federal FPTP democracy. Neither literature uses recent harmonised indicators to compare the two cases. This study addresses these gaps by:

holding the comparison to one variable, namely legal and electoral mechanisms;
updating the evidence to 2025–2026; and
testing the claim about substantive limits against WPS Index data.

Theoretical Framework

Liberal feminist theory

The liberal feminist views the cause of gender inequality as a lack of equal rights, equal opportunities for education, jobs and public office. It believes that this inequality can be rectified with legal and policy change in the existing democratic institutions (Giddens, 2006). The tradition goes back to Wollstonecraft (1792/2003) who protested against the presumed inferiority of women and called for equal rights. It was later extended by Phillips (1995) with her "politics of presence." She said it was essential for women to be there in legislatures, and not be represented by men claiming to speak for them, if the law is to be democratic and fair. This theory is important in shaping the way the study considers the representation of women in seats as a worthwhile result. It also addresses why its solutions are legal, including the use of quotas and reserved seats and enforceable non-discrimination.

Feminist institutionalism

Feminist institutionalism proposes that there is gender in formal and informal institutions. Electoral laws and party rules, as well as unwritten rules of candidate selection, systematically favour one sex (Krook & Mackay, 2011). This theory provides the comparative variable for this study. FPTP involves competition between one candidate from each party per constituency and male-dominated selectorates choose the "safest" candidate, which is typically a man. Women's presence can be institutionalised (Krook, 2009) through closed-list proportional representation with reserved seats. Within these formal rules, there are informal rules in the form of godfatherism and monetisation of theprimaries. Feminist institutionalism also helps to understand the lack of effective numerical representation in substantive power: the dominance of the executive branch in Rwanda is largely informal, meaning that any single legislator has limited powers (Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Burnet, 2008).

Participatory democracy as normative anchor

Participatory democratic theory treats broad citizen involvement as a defining principle of democracy, in contrast to elitist theories that leave decisions to a few (Gauba, 2003). It supplies the normative reason for concern: a democracy that systematically excludes half its citizens from decision-making falls short of its own standards.

Critical mass: a qualification

Dahlerup (1988) questioned the popular idea that women's influence rises automatically once they pass a "critical mass" of about 30 per cent. She argued that critical acts by women and allies matter more than numbers alone. This qualification frames the analysis in Section 6.4.

Methodology

Design. This study is a qualitative comparative case-study with descriptive statistics. Nigeria and Rwanda are contrasted as high and low outcome countries. They both are African countries, both have post-colonial and conflict history, both are States Parties of CEDAW and Maputo Protocol and both have patriarchal social norms. They vary significantly in both

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parliamentary representation of women and in the variable of interest, legal and electoral inclusion mechanisms. Other differences such as federalism, size of the population and type of regime are recognized as constraints and addressed in the analysis without being ignored.

Variables.

Outcome: women's descriptive representation, measured as the percentage of seats held by women in the national legislature. For Nigeria this is the National Assembly (both chambers, 469 seats). For Rwanda it is the Chamber of Deputies (80 seats).

Explanatory variable: legal and electoral mechanisms, made up of (i) whether a quota exists and its legal status (constitutional, statutory or policy), (ii) reserved seats and (iii) the electoral system.

Secondary check: selected 2025 WPS Index indicators, used to assess whether descriptive representation is associated with wider gender -equality outcomes.

Data sources. The study uses only secondary data, drawn from:

the Inter-Parliamentary Union's Parline database and its *Women in parliament 2025* report;

the 2025 WPS Index, Table 1 (GIWPS & PRIO, 2025), covering 181 countries and 13 indicators;

INEC candidate data as analysed by Nkereuwem (2023) and Adanikin (2022);

Kartay's (2025) compilation of National Assembly seats by sex from INEC and IPU records;

constitutional, policy and court documents, together with CEDAW Committee concluding observations; and

peer-reviewed literature.

The quantitative analysis covers trends across electoral cycles, period means, percentage-point gaps and comparisons with regional and global benchmarks. The qualitative analysis compares legal instruments using documents. Where sources disagreed, for example on the number of women in a given Nigerian assembly, the study took figures at the date of inauguration from a single compilation for consistency and reported the discrepancies.

Published counts of women in Nigeria's National Assembly vary because of election re-runs and court judgments. The Rwanda series refers only to the lower house. The WPS Index's parliamentary indicator combines both chambers, so it gives 61.3 per cent for Rwanda, compared with 63.8 per cent for the Chamber of Deputies alone. Finally, two country cases cannot establish causation. The study therefore claims consistency with the institutional explanation rather than proof of it.

Results and Discussion

Trends in women's legislative representation

Table 1. Women in Nigeria's National Assembly at inauguration, 1999–2023

Assembly (election year)	Senate: women / 109	House: women / 360	Total women / 469	% women	Men	% men
4th (1999)	3	9	12	2.6	457	97.4
5th (2003)	4	21	25	5.3	444	94.7
6th (2007)	9	26	35	7.5	434	92.5
7th (2011)	7	25	32	6.8	437	93.2
8th (2015)	8	22	30	6.4	439	93.6
9th (2019)	7	11	18	3.8	451	96.2
10th (2023)	3	14	17	3.6	452	96.4
Mean, 1999–2023				**5.1**		

Source: Kartay (2025), compiled from INEC reports and the IPU. *Note:* Other sources report slightly different counts for some assemblies. For example, Eboesomi (2026) gives 16 women in 1999 and 36 in 2007. After election petitions, the 10th Assembly stood at 4 senators and 16 representatives, or 4.3

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per cent (Eboesomi, 2026). Percentages are computed by the author.

Table 2. Women in Rwanda's Chamber of Deputies, 2003–2024

Election	Women / 80	% women	Men	% men
2003	39	48.8	41	51.2
2008	45	56.3	35	43.7
2013	51	63.8	29	36.2
2018	49	61.3	31	38.7
2024	51	63.8	29	36.2
Mean, 2003–2024		**58.8**		

Source: IPU Parline (2025); UN Women Rwanda (Karungi, 2024). *Note:* The earlier draft of this paper used a total of 106 seats and gave 61.25 per cent as Rwanda's "current" figure. Both have been corrected to the lower-house figures recorded by the IPU.

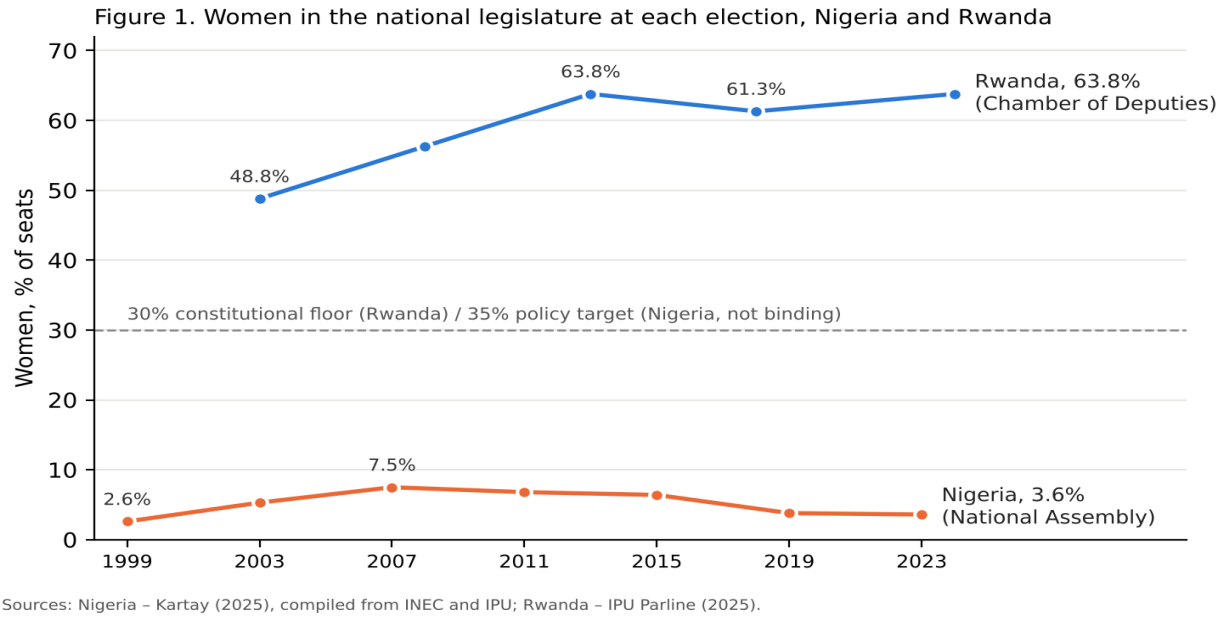


Figure 1. Women in the national legislature at each election, Nigeria and Rwanda. Sources: as for Tables 1 and 2.

The two series barely overlap. Nigeria's best result, 7.5 per cent in 2007, is less than one-sixth of Rwanda's worst, 48.8 per cent in 2003. Over the periods covered, the mean gap is 53.7 percentage points. At their latest elections, Rwanda's share of women legislators (63.8 per cent) was about 17.7 times Nigeria's (3.6 per cent). Nigeria's trend is also not simply flat: it has declined since 2007. Its 2023 figure was lower than in 2003, and it is well below the sub-Saharan African mean of 24.5 per cent and the global figure of 27.5 per cent (GIWPS & PRIO, 2025; IPU, 2026).

The gap is not limited to parliament. Nigeria's cabinet had 8 women among 46 ministers in 2024, about 17 per cent (Opara, 2024). After the October 2024 reshuffle, it had 7 women among 48, or 14.6 per cent (Taiwo, n.d.). Both figures are far below the 35 per cent policy target. Rwanda's cabinet, by contrast, was reported as 52 per cent female after a 2019 reshuffle (Iribagiza, 2019). The 2025 Global Gender Gap Report places Nigeria 143rd of 148 economies on political empowerment (Olofinko, 2025).

The explanatory variable: legal and electoral mechanisms compared

Table 3. Mechanisms for women's inclusion in Nigeria and Rwanda

Mechanism	Rwanda	Nigeria

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Mechanism	Rwanda	Nigeria
Legal status of quota	The Constitution (Republic of Rwanda, 2015) requires women to hold at least 30% of posts in decision-making organs.	The National Gender Policy (2006; revised 2021–2026) sets a 35% target for elective and appointive posts. It has no statutory or constitutional force (CEDAW Committee, 2017, para. 19).
Reserved seats	24 of 80 seats in the Chamber of Deputies are reserved for women and filled through women-only electoral colleges (IPU Parline, 2025).	The Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill failed at second reading in the Senate in March 2016 (Africanews, 2016). Reserved-seat and party-quota bills were rejected on 1 March 2022 (PLAC, 2022). The Special Seats Bill (HB 1349), which proposes 74 extra seats, was unresolved as at May 2026 (Eboesomi, 2026).
Electoral system	Closed-list proportional representation for 53 general seats, plus indirectly elected reserved seats.	First-past-the-post in single-member constituencies for both chambers.
Party candidate quotas	Party lists operate within a constitutional gender-balance norm.	The 35% party-administration quota was rejected in 2022 (PLAC, 2022).
Enforcement	Built into the electoral rules, so the 30% floor is guaranteed whatever the general-seat results.	A court order (Federal High Court, 6 April 2022) exists but has not been implemented. At subnational level there is one example, Kwara State's 2021 law reserving 35% of appointments for women (ThisDay, 2021).
International obligations	State Party to CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol.	State Party to CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol, but CEDAW has not been domesticated. The CEDAW Committee urged incorporation and quotas (2017, paras. 10, 20, 30).

Sources: As cited in the table.

Three findings follow from Table 3.

First, the mechanism determines the minimum level of representation. Rwanda's reserved seats guarantee 30 per cent before any general-seat votes are counted. Nigeria has no such guarantee, so its outcome depends entirely on party nomination decisions. As Section 3.1 showed, parties nominated women for only about 9 per cent of federal candidacies in 2023, and mostly on small parties (Nkereuwem, 2023).

Second, quotas do more than guarantee the reserved seats. In 2024, women won 27 of the 56 Rwandan seats not reserved for them, about 48 per cent. This result is consistent with the claim that reserved seats help make women's candidacy normal across all seats, not only the reserved ones (Burnet, 2011). It also matches the IPU's cross-national finding that chambers with quotas average 7.6 percentage points more women than chambers without them (IPU, 2026).

Third, Nigeria's electoral system magnifies cultural barriers instead of offsetting them. Under FPTP, a party fields one candidate per seat. Where godfathers and costly primaries control selection, women are less likely than men to become that one candidate (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023; Ogunbodede & Akinyetun, 2026). Culture explains why parties prefer men. The electoral system explains why that preference translates almost completely into the composition of parliament.

The comparison also has limits. Rwanda adopted its quota during a post-genocide constitutional refounding under a dominant ruling party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (Burnet, 2008; Hughes & Tripp, 2015). Nigeria is a competitive federal system in which any constitutional amendment needs the approval of two-thirds of the National Assembly and of 24 of the 36 State Houses of Assembly. Rwanda's mechanism therefore cannot simply be copied. Nigeria's Special Seats Bill can be read as an attempt to adapt it: it adds women-

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only seats to existing constituencies instead of replacing FPTP.

Did Nigeria's commitments translate into practice?

There is evidence that the Nigerian government has failed to promote equality. The evidence is specific:

The 35 per cent target has existed since 2006. In 2024, the federal cabinet stood at roughly 15–17 per cent women (Opara, 2024).

The National Assembly rejected the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill in 2016 and the reserved-seat and party-quota bills in 2022 (Africanews, 2016; PLAC, 2022).

The Federal High Court ordered implementation of the 35 per cent target in April 2022 (Channels Television, 2022). The 10th Assembly inaugurated the following year had fewer women than the 9th.

In 2017, the CEDAW Committee faulted Nigeria for failing to incorporate the Convention into domestic law and for leaving its quota without a legislative basis (CEDAW Committee, 2017, paras. 9–10, 19–20).

Nigeria's failure is therefore not one of stated intent. Its commitments remain at the level of policy and have not been converted into enforceable law. This is the institutional variable at the centre of this study.

Do the numbers bring broader equality? Evidence from the WPS Index 2025

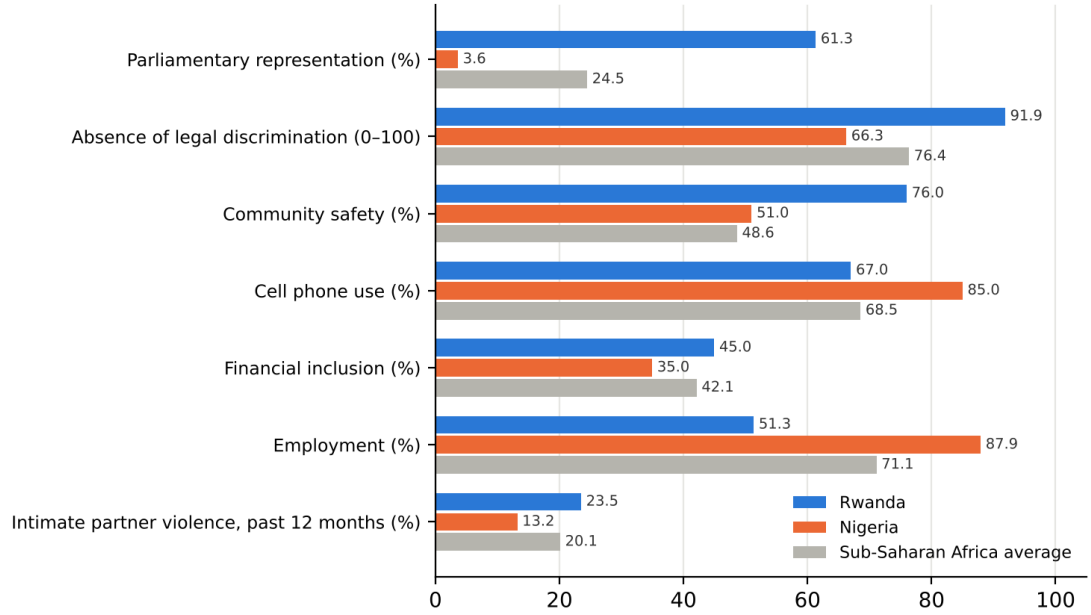
Table 4. Selected WPS Index 2025 indicators: Nigeria, Rwanda and benchmarks

Indicator (unit)	Rwanda	Nigeria	Sub-Saharan Africa mean	World mean
WPS Index score (0–1)	0.624	0.495	0.511	0.650
WPS Index rank (of 181)	121	162	–	–
Parliamentary representation, both chambers (%)	61.3	3.6	24.5	23.5
Absence of legal discrimination (0–100)	91.9	66.3	76.4	76.1
Access to justice for women (0–4)	2.22	2.59	2.24	2.22
Education, mean years of schooling (women 25+)	4.5	6.6	5.3	8.4
Employment (%)	51.3	87.9	71.1	56.3
Financial inclusion (%)	45.0[a]	35.0	42.1	70.3
Cell phone use (%)	67	85	68.5	83.5
Maternal mortality (deaths per 100,000 live births)	229	993	436	188
Intimate partner violence, past 12 months (%)	23.5	13.2	20.1	12.4
Community safety (% of women who feel safe at night)	76	51	48.6	66.3
Proximity to conflict (% of women within 50 km)	17.6	60.1	36.9	21.7

Source: GIWPS and PRIO (2025), *Women, Peace and Security Index 2025*, Table 1 (dataset supplied as Dat.xlsx). [a] Refers to 2017. Regional and world figures are unweighted country means as published.

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Figure 2. Selected Women, Peace and Security Index 2025 indicators



Source: GIWPS & PRIO (2025), WPS Index 2025, Table 1 (Dat.xlsx). Rwanda financial inclusion refers to 2017.

Figure 2. Selected WPS Index 2025 indicators for Rwanda, Nigeria and the sub-Saharan African average. Source: GIWPS & PRIO (2025).

The WPS data support a balanced conclusion.

Rwanda's representation actually coincides with better outcomes. Rwanda performs much better than Nigeria on the dimensions most directly shaped by law and the state:

Legal discrimination: Rwanda scores 91.9 on the absence of legal discrimination, against 66.3 for Nigeria.

Maternal mortality: Rwanda records 229 deaths per 100,000 live births, against 993 for Nigeria.

Safety: In Rwanda, 76 per cent of women feel safe walking at night, against 51 per cent in Nigeria.

These indicators are consistent with research showing that women legislators in Rwanda broadened the legislative agenda, for example on gender-based violence and inheritance (Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Burnet, 2011).

However, there are other metrics that gives Nigeria a hedge. Rwanda ranks only 121st of 181 on the overall WPS Index. It trails Nigeria on women's education (4.5 against 6.6 mean years of schooling), employment (51.3 against 87.9 per cent) and mobile phone use (67 against 85 per cent). Its rate of intimate partner violence in the past 12 months, 23.5 per cent, is higher than both Nigeria's and the regional mean. Earlier reports also found that most Rwandan women work in the informal sector or in low-wage jobs, and that women hold a minority of managerial posts (WEF, 2021, as reported by Umuhoza, 2023).

These patterns support Dahlerup's (1988) caution about critical mass and the findings of Debusschere and Ansoms (2013) and Berry (2015). A parliamentary majority of women is a means to equality, not equality itself. For Nigeria, the lesson is not to treat quotas as a cure for every gender gap. Quotas are the most reliable route to the first step, which is getting women into the rooms where laws on education, health, inheritance and violence are made.

Lessons for Nigeria

Rwanda's 30 per cent floor works because it is in the Constitution and built into the electoral rules. Nigeria's 35 per cent target has remained a policy aspiration for two decades, and only Kwara State has turned it into law (ThisDay, 2021).

Under FPTP, voluntary appeals to parties have not worked. Reserved seats added to existing constituencies, as proposed in HB 1349, are the closest workable equivalent to Rwanda's model. Statutory candidate quotas for parties, enforced by INEC, would complement them.

Women's candidacies are concentrated on

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small parties, and nomination fees in the main parties are high (Nkereuwem, 2023). Fee caps, waivers and campaign-finance support tied to winnable seats would address the demand-side barrier directly.

Rwanda's experience shows that legislators need cross-party caucuses, independent oversight and links to grassroots women's organisations, so that more women in office improves outcomes for women outside it (Burnet, 2011; Berry, 2015).

Recommendations

Each recommendation is tied to an empirically documented shortcoming.

Pass the Reserved Seats for Women Bill (HB 1349) and secure its ratification by State Houses of Assembly. *Documented shortcoming:* women held 3.6 per cent of seats in 2023, and reserved-seat bills failed in 2016 and 2022 and remained unresolved in 2026 (Kartay, 2025; PLAC, 2022; Eboesomi, 2026).

Give the 35 per cent target statutory force and domesticate CEDAW, as the CEDAW Committee recommended. *Documented shortcoming:* the quota lacks a legislative basis, and CEDAW has not been incorporated into Nigerian law (CEDAW Committee, 2017, paras. 10, 19–20).

Amend the Electoral Act to require political parties to nominate a minimum share of women for winnable seats, with INEC empowered to reject non-compliant lists. *Documented shortcoming:* women were about 9 per cent of federal candidates in 2023, and most of them ran on small parties (Nkereuwem, 2023).

Comply with the April 2022 Federal High Court judgment on executive appointments, and publish annual sex-disaggregated appointment data. *Documented shortcoming:* women held about 15–17 per cent of federal cabinet posts in 2024 (Opara, 2024).

Encourage other states to domesticate the revised National Gender Policy, using Kwara State's 2021 law as a model. *Documented shortcoming:* Kwara remains the only state cited with a binding 35 per cent appointment law (ThisDay, 2021; Tyessi, 2023).

Address violence against women in politics and the gap between northern and southern states through INEC and security-agency protocols and targeted candidate support. *Documented shortcoming:* female candidacy ranged from 2 per cent in Kano to 16 per cent in Lagos in 2023, and women candidates reported intimidation throughout the electoral cycle (Nkereuwem, 2023).

Conclusion

This paper compared women's parliamentary representation in Nigeria and Rwanda through one variable: legal and electoral mechanisms for inclusion. Women held an average of 5.1 per cent of seats across Nigeria's seven assemblies and 58.8 per cent across Rwanda's five lower-house elections. That gap is consistent with the institutional difference between the two countries. Rwanda has a constitutional 30 per cent floor, delivered through reserved seats and proportional representation. Nigeria has a 35 per cent policy target that has never been made law, operating in a first-past-the-post system. Patriarchal culture, religion and money politics are real constraints in Nigeria. However, countries with comparable cultures have achieved far better results, and Nigeria's National Assembly has repeatedly rejected the laws that would bypass those constraints. Both facts point to institutional design as the variable Nigeria can most readily change.

The Rwandan case also shows the limits of numbers. Its mid-table ranking on the 2025 WPS Index indicates that descriptive representation is necessary but not sufficient for broader gender equality. Future research could build on this study by testing the institutional explanation across a larger set of African countries. It could also examine subnational variation within Nigeria, for example by comparing Kwara State with states that have no gender-appointment law.

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