

# Promoting Gender Parity In Northern Nigeria's Political Governance: Challenges And Prospects

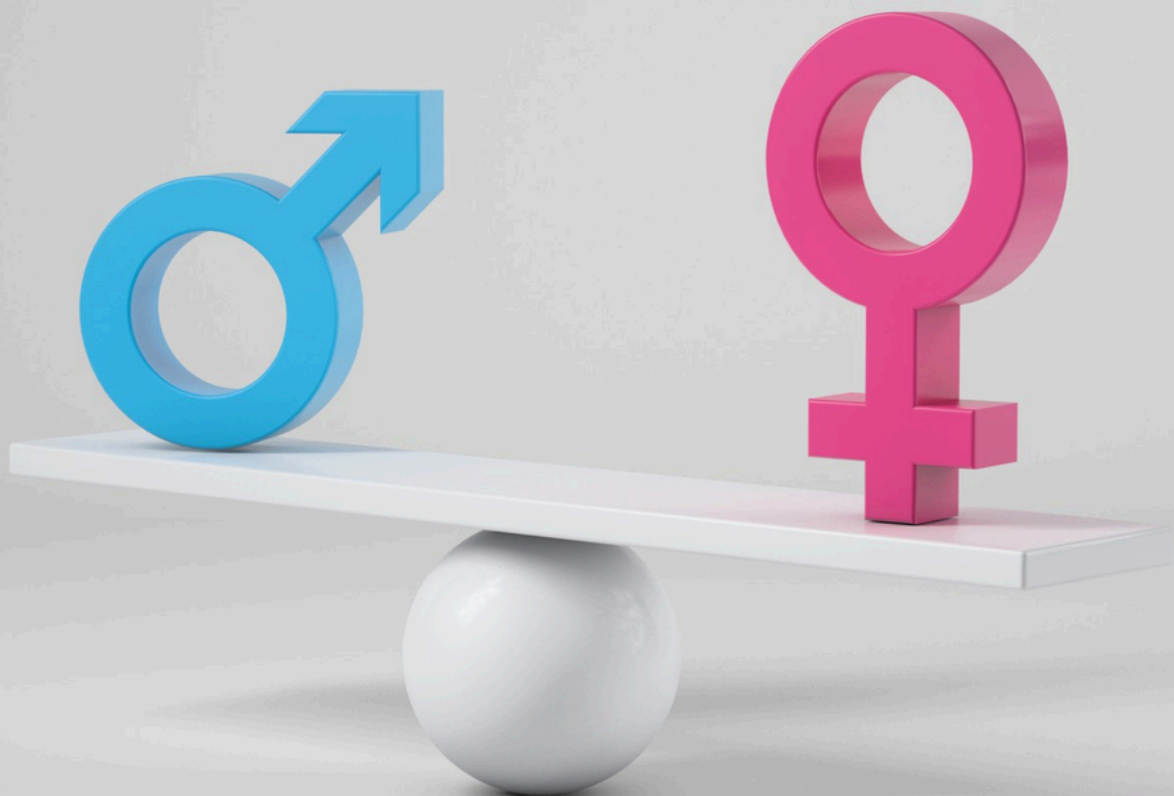
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## Executive Summary

Democratic participation of women and marginalised groups within formal governance structures is crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goals 5 (gender equality), 10 (reducing income and resource inequality), and 16 (inclusive participation and representative decision-making for sustainability). However, the progress in governance for Nigerian women is largely disproportionate. More grievous is the gender deficit in political participation that is more apparent in Northern Nigeria. To address this gap, the study employs a purposive sampling technique to select and interview 12 women leaders in Ministries, Departments, and Agencies in 6 Northern Nigerian states. The key participant interview responses were analysed using the thematic content technique to code responses into themes. The findings suggest that religio-cultural barriers, political gatekeeping, institutional weaknesses, and a lack of transitional mentoring initiatives inhibit their influence and participation in the broad political landscape. Drawing on their personal experiences, the brief concluded that substantive female representation, in line with the UN's policy recommendations, is necessary for effective and inclusive governance in Nigeria. As such, policy experts should advocate for the implementation of structured mentorship and leadership initiatives to expand opportunities for women's participation in governance. Furthermore, there is a need for political party structure reform to reduce exclusion and minimise gatekeeping bottlenecks, while providing financial and economic resources to enhance visibility and promote gender-balanced participation in the Nigerian governance structure.

# 1. Introduction

Promoting inclusive governance participation is crucial to achieving the core principle of democracy and achieving universal gender representation in global politics. The concept entails transforming institutions, governance processes, and structures to enable the optimal utilisation and reflection of male and female cognitive reasoning, experiences, and capabilities in power distribution, resource allocation, decision-making, and policy outcomes, thereby achieving the UN's developmental goals (UN Women, 2026).

Despite the potential implications of women in leadership and governance, which is crucial to democratic governance and global developmental growth, they are continually marginalised due to restrictive laws, discriminatory cultural practices, unequal and low educational access, institutional barriers, and social care norms. In framing the gap from the civil rights perspective, every woman has a right to express their electoral preferences and contest to serve in public offices. They are also expected to have their voices heard in the decision-making process and to react to societal issues that affect them, their families, and the community at large, as stated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Nkereuwem, 2023).

Existing studies have generalised about the low participation of women in governance without providing critical diagnoses of the specific structural barriers that aggravate regional disparities in female participation. Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence on women's transition into public leadership roles and the challenges they encounter as they move into the broader political landscape. This brief seeks to achieve two objectives. First, it is necessary to provide a regional diagnosis of the probable factors contributing to low gender participation in the most vulnerable region, while accounting for the challenges female leaders in MDA face as they transition into the broader political structure.





## 2. Mainstreaming Gender Participation in the Nigerian Political Landscape

In Nigeria, the National Gender Policy recommends a de jure affirmative action target of 35 percent to achieve a critical mass of women in executive, judicial, and legislative positions. It also ensures that women's representation reflects effectiveness and optimal functioning, rather than symbolic tokenism. Achieving these targets is crucial to the democratic legitimacy, effectiveness of development, and the success of context-specific interventions.

Recent statistics and outcomes suggest that Nigeria is among the countries with the lowest levels of women's political participation, hence struggling to meet the quota. The Global Gender Gap Report noted that Nigeria consistently ranks at the bottom in terms of the political empowerment index, as the second-lowest country in women's political participation, scoring 0.04 in key political positions (Nasiru, 2025; UN Women, 2025). Similarly, in 2023, women constituted about 4.2 percent, roughly 20, of the 469 elective positions in the Nigerian National Assembly (Opara, 2025). This performance was below Sub-Saharan Africa's performance of 26.0 percent and the global average of 26.5 percent. More instructively, the 2023 election had 1544 female political candidates, indicating a ratio of 1 to 10 male aspirants. Overall, the election resulted in a reduction in female representation, with approximately a 19 percent decrease in the number of female elected positions compared to the previous electoral exercise (Nkereuwem, 2023).

The post-2023 election review revealed that there was no women's representation in the gubernatorial seats in the last election. Furthermore, the minuscule representation of women in elective and appointed positions is further exacerbated by significant regional disparities throughout the country. The deficit is more pronounced in the Northern part of the country than in the other regions. Statistics from the Fourth Republic reveal a persistent trend in women's political participation in the legislative and executive branches, with a notable tilt towards the South. National legislators, including senators and representatives in the House of Representatives, are perceived as having greater dominance and higher success rates for women in the three southern regions compared to the northern zones.

The persistent disparity in female governance participation in the Nigerian Southern and Northern regions reveals a profound patriarchal gatekeeping and systemic exclusion. Women in Southern states occupied 3 to 6 deputy gubernatorial seats between 1999 and 2023, but their counterparts held no such seats. In the 2023 general elections, 24 women vied for deputy governorship positions, and 6 were successful and are currently serving; only two were from the Northern states, namely Kaduna and Plateau (Iniobong, 2025). The sub-national legislative position reflected the same pattern, with significant dominance in Southern Nigeria. Western states, such as Ekiti State, had the highest number of female lawmakers in their state houses (Oloyede, 2016). Overall, the success rate remains abysmal with less than 25 percent female participation, thus highlighting the socio-political barriers that stifle inclusive governance. More importantly, female roles are limited in agenda setting and committee representation, restricting their leverage in coalition building and policy framing, thereby altering institutional legitimacy.



### 3. A synthesis of theoretical and empirical insights on women's participation in politics

Scholars have provided theoretical justifications for the importance of women's participation in leadership and politics by exploring their causal pathways to policy reform. The initial theoretical stance is based on descriptive representation theory. The theory stipulates that political systems accrue legitimacy by accurately reflecting the equitable representation of their demographic population structure (Bratton & Ray, 2002; Pitkin, 1967). This indicated that active feminine representation, alongside other demographics such as age, race, and educational structure, symbolises descriptive representation. In particular, the female symbolic endorsement serves as a transmission mechanism for effective governance, fostering institutional trust, political efficacy, and inclusive governance. However, the theory expressed some limitations in male-dominated patriarchal systems, where there is apparent systemic neglect of gender-specific concerns (Atkeson & Carrillo, 2007). The mere representation may offer insubstantial gender impacts on agenda-setting for marginalised and vulnerable sectors of the population. In essence, the lack of women's representation raises concerns about effective decision-making and policy actions, while aggravating gender inequality in policy outcomes.

The other stream emphasises that substantive representation and the need for increased female participation through mechanisms that support their voices, actions, and visibility, thus promoting their active involvement in agenda-setting. The theory emphasises deliberate influences and gender committee involvement as critical pathways for legislators to shift their focus to inclusive, gender-responsive, secure positions for effective decision-making. Klay et al. (2025) find significant differences in social policy decision-making between female and male legislators, but no differences in other policies unrelated to social outcomes. Both theories address the structural and democratic deficits affecting women, with an emphasis on inequalities in demographic characteristics and on representation for inclusive governance. The theoretical chain provides a causal link between increased women's descriptive presence and substantive policy outcomes resulting from their participation in politics.

Empirical investigations have consistently demonstrated the enduring importance of female political participation worldwide. Some studies have affirmed that having substantive female participation in governance promotes sustainability through effective policy decisions, especially in EU countries (Koengkan et al., 2026; Rios et al., 2024).

However, the case is not the same for a developing country like Nigeria. Female participation in governance is merely symbolic, constrained by structural bottlenecks, a lack of decentralised power, and inadequate quota enforcement for agenda-setting (Salaudeen, 2025). Most importantly, the ineffectiveness stems from significant cultural, structural, and institutional barriers that hinder women's participation in governance. More importantly, political godfatherism, dominance control and male-dominated patronage networks further influence the selection of women into appointive positions. Further, lagging policy reforms slow progress toward inclusive governance (Erwin et al., 2025; Koengkan et al., 2026; Oloyede, 2016).



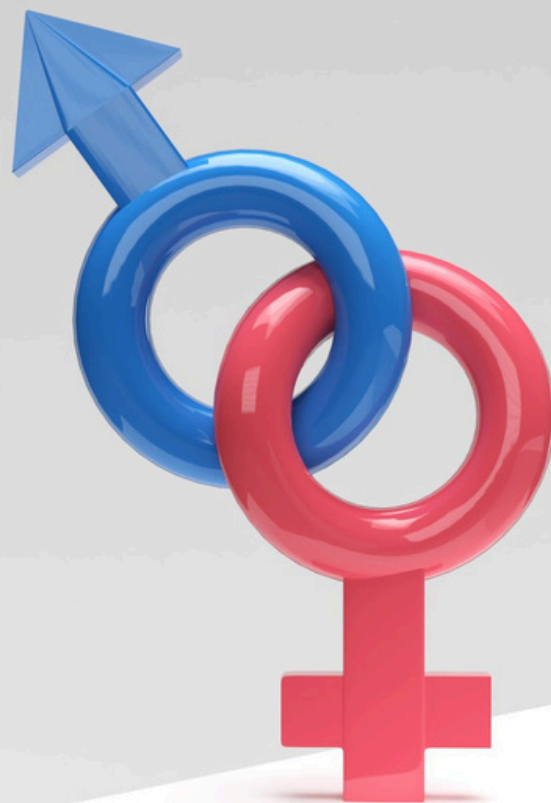
## 4. Methodological Considerations for the Validation of Northern Women in Governance

This brief is anchored in the interpretivist philosophy, which centres on the subjective analysis of interviews to understand the challenges hindering women's political participation. The design captures lived experiences and nuanced reflections that are not readily observable through quantitative data (Saunders et al., 2019). This approach allowed participants to describe their journeys in their own words and highlight the informal and subtle dynamics that shape women's leadership trajectories. Furthermore, the qualitative inquiry helps obtain personal opinions and facts about the structural, cultural, and institutional factors shaping women's participation in Nigeria's governance structure. Their experiences provided grounded perspectives on barriers, opportunities, and pathways for strengthening women's influence in decision-making.

The key participants were selected using purposive and snowball non-probability sampling to identify females currently engaged in public leadership, governance, development coordination, and politically related roles in Northern Nigeria. Northern Nigeria is an instructive focus because it is particularly rooted in male power dominance, and women are subjected to peculiar disparities in educational attainment, structural and cultural barriers to owning their voices in economic, social, and political participation. The sample included 12 women from various sectors, including state-level governance, regional coordination bodies, and political engagement spaces, in six (6) Northern Nigerian states: Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Nasarawa, and Plateau. This diversity provided a broad understanding of barriers across different levels of the decision-making ecosystem. Although the methodology is ideal for this study because it seeks to understand the lived experiences of women in governance, it is, however, marred by some limitations. First, the sample size may not be representative of the population of women in governance in Northern Nigeria. Second, there is a perceived bias in the use of snowball sampling, as it relies on participants' networks. Also, there may be instances of social desirability bias in which interview responses may be skewed toward societal expectations rather than respondents' personal experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Nevertheless, there is a need to exercise caution when generalising findings whose subjective outcomes yield policy insights that can be reproduced in other sub-groups within the research site.

The principle of ethical consideration was applied, as participation was not coercive, the purpose of the research was expressly explained, and informed consent was sought before the interview commenced. Participants were assured they would receive feedback on the conclusions and policy actions resulting from their participation. Also, the researchers' reflexivity, positionality, and bias. Interviewers' conversations around the interview guide to ensure a consistent communication tone.

Also, ethical training to ensure adherence to academic standards. Lastly, a researcher performed an independent review of the coded responses, narration, and interpretation to rule out potential bias in the thematic analysis. Information on their perceptions and participation in leadership and political roles was obtained through semi-structured in-person and online interviews. The interview guide explored 10 critical topics: motivation for leadership, cultural and gender norms, structural and institutional barriers, party politics, funding, support systems, the effectiveness of gender policies, and recommendations for reform. This format enabled flexibility for participants to elaborate on complex issues while ensuring consistency across interviews. The obtained responses were reviewed, synthesised, and coded to identify cross-cutting themes, including underestimation of women's authority, cultural and religious constraints, limited access to funding and networks, weak implementation of gender policies, and gaps in mentorship and leadership pipelines. Direct statements were distilled into central themes to preserve participants' voices while providing a clear and concise analysis.



## 5. Emergent Patterns for Policy Insights

Figure 1 shows that the respondents fall within the youthful age bracket, specifically 25-40 years old. 17.0 percent of the respondents are between 25 and 30 years old, 50.0 percent fall within the 30- to 35-year-old age range, and about 33.0 percent are in the 35- to 40-year-old age range.

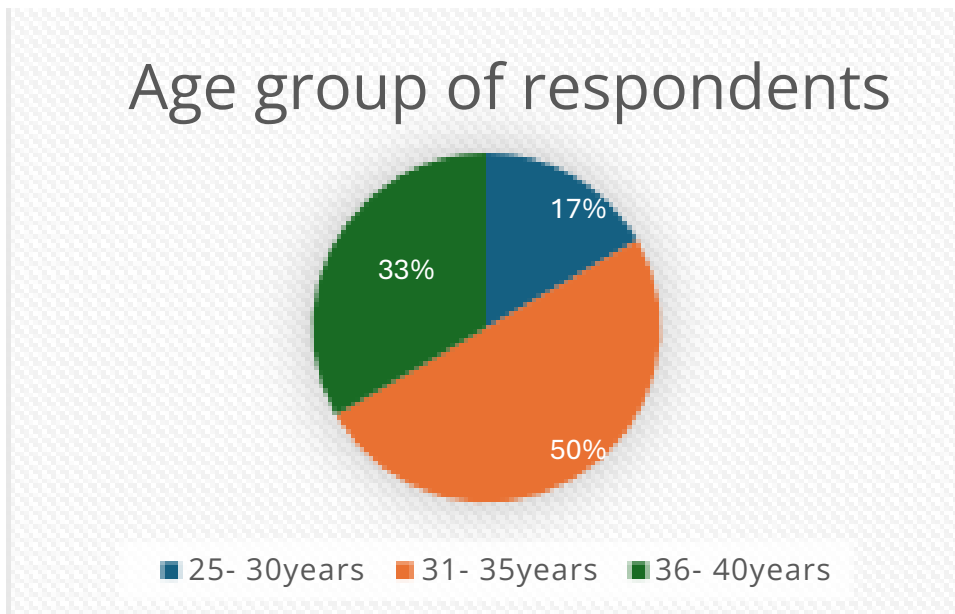


Figure 1: Age group of Respondents extracted from their interview responses

Figure 2 shows the distribution of respondents by their appointment to governance roles. The first group comprises the Heads of MDAs, who hold roles such as Director-General, Executive Secretary, Executive Chairman, and Honourable Commissioners.

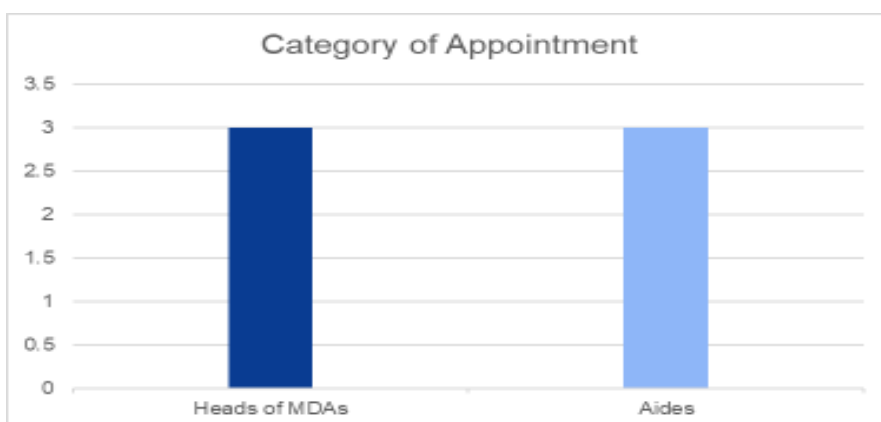


Figure 2: Category of Appointments

The second group consists of Aides to elected officials, such as Technical Assistants, Senior Special Assistants, Special Advisers, Chiefs of Staff, and Deputy Chiefs of Staff. Together, they show perspectives from both agency leadership and political advisory positions. Furthermore, the interviewed females in governance are spread across six states in Northern Nigeria: Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Nasarawa and Plateau.

- *Thematic analysis of responses*

The thematic responses from the interviewees reveal consistent patterns in the socio-cultural, religious, and economic norms that shape the pathways and patterns of women's engagement in political and democratic governance. The themes are narrated in turns as follows:

**Theme 1:** *Professional exposure and civic interests are the motivations for assuming leadership roles*

The first identified theme from the interview responses suggests that female participation in governance is driven by self-motivation, civic altruism, and a strong sense of service. Their motivation stems from the desire to strengthen governance systems and a commitment to improving outcomes in their communities. About 50.0 percent affirmed that their interest in political participation was fuelled by their passion for protecting civic rights. 40.0 percent noted that their long-standing professional career growth in the civil service, combined with the low participation of women in governance, aroused their interest in participating in governance roles. A few other responses noted that their extended family is the primary influence on their courage to serve in leadership capacities. Others traced their motivation to a passionate moral obligation to support younger girls and vulnerable, underserved populations. In summary, the findings deepen the collectivist motivational framework, underscoring the importance of women's moral obligations to serve vulnerable groups in tandem with legacy-building for generational growth and sustainability through social responsibility.

**Theme 2:** *Persistent patriarchal system, stereotyped gender, and social norms limit women's participation in governance and politics.*

A consistent pattern was observed among the respondents regarding gender, cultural, and social biases that inhibit women's participation in governance. Seventy-five percent of respondents noted that women's capabilities are underestimated in governance, thereby limiting their participation to support roles. Additionally, when asked to comment on biases that inhibit their performance, approximately 85 percent noted that culture and religion are crucial to women's involvement in politics. In some cultural climes, women are subjected to domestic roles of childcare, procreation, and are also not allowed to get involved in decision-making on the home front.

By default, a girl child is exposed to a mental mindset of early marriages, little or no educational access, thereby culturally limiting their capability for optimal intellectual functioning. About 20.0 percent of the respondents mentioned the prevalence of religious purdah practices. The practice restricts women's movement, participation, and their ability to engage in governance in the region.

**Theme 3:** *Structural and institutional constraints to women's active participation in governance and politics.*

This theme captures the respondent's perception that inclusive governance is marred by a systemic weakness in institutional mentorship, thereby creating a void that bars women from culturally entrenched, male-dominated governance in appointive positions. Approximately two-thirds of respondents cited the lack of mentorship opportunities for women in male-dominated governance and senior executive roles. These restrictions limit women's access to formal networks, which are culturally designed to provide enabling mentorship platforms for men. In the same vein, implementation is weak, and there is a lack of a coercive approach to enforcing gender quotas and inclusion policies across ministries, as well as in judicial, executive, and legislative positions. Lastly, the findings reveal a dearth of opportunity for women's engagement in strategic and technical positions to maximise substantive representation and intellectual contributions to inclusive democracy and nation-building.

Other constraints coded from the responses include financial constraints that make nomination fees unaffordable and an opaque political party structure with a near-total dominance of male politicians in decision-making for primary nominations. Some other respondents pointed to disproportionate scoring metrics for valuating expertise, skills, and experience. Most of the metrics fail to consider the structural and social norms that create gaps in women's achievements, employment history, and other attributed family biases. By implication, the findings underscore an unpronounced governance enforcement gap, creating strategic marginalisation of women in high-stakes technical, professional, and appointive roles. The theme further highlights structural disparities in substantive representation in core national institutions and in career progression.

## 6. Implications and Policy Recommendations

This policy brief highlights the implications of the findings and offers some recommendations for policy action.

- 1. For gender-inclusive, legitimate governance to be achieved, specialised gender ministries should establish women's grassroots leadership initiatives for every girl child.***

A recurring pattern in women's motivation in politics in the North reflects that the zeal for leadership, governance, and political participation arises as their careers progress. One of the interviewees, aged 35-40, said, "I was in a support role until I began presenting." This indicated that authority was not immediately granted to women, unlike it was to their counterparts. Another respondent shared that "men walk into the room with presumed authority; women have to prove theirs." The unequal baseline limits their influence in decision-making, reinforces institutional bias, and slows down their progression in the default male-dominated power space.

As policy options, leadership and governance may be incorporated into the educational curriculum, where women's confidence, capability, and competence are developed in a formalised setting. Also, Women's inclusion in political and governance participation must emerge from grassroots leadership programs: Instituting a leadership program would help women assume authority in their youthful and productive years.

- 2. Regulators and civil society organisations should embark on intensive sensitisation of men on the importance of decoupling gender from cultural norms to increase women's participation in governance.***

Culture and gender norms are crucial factors that shape institutional behaviour and acceptance of women in politics. Men should be sensitised to reorient their perceptions of women's capabilities and cognitive abilities. The stereotyped orientation of women should be kept, and they should be subjected only to family care roles, which often limit their intellectual contributions to social development. As one of the respondents stated, she is always encountering restrictions from her family and spouse about the need to act within the care economy, which led to her divorce. In her words, "I often encounter restraint from my ex-husband; he is always challenged by my participation in governance as he feels I am already above him and that won't make me submissive, even when I go out of my way to effectively combine family demands with work pressures" . Another emerging revelation arises in the workplace where male counterparts often question women's capability to perform effectively.

One of the respondents noted that she frequently navigates and outperforms herself to show competence amongst her counterparts, as they already have a predetermined mindset about what women can offer. In her words “the question of what roles should women play is always reflected in the decision room even when I led the processes, colleagues are always positions to assign support roles to women while assigning technical tasks and obligations to themselves especially leadership and outstation roles” The dual lived experiences both in the social and corporate spaces often created by cultural and gender norms reduces women's visibility in governance, authority as they occupy formal positions in governance. In response to these obstacles, policymakers are expected to include men in sensitisation programs that de-emphasise cultural and structural barriers to women's participation in governance.

*3. Executives and legislators should enforce gender quotas in political structures, as restrictive gatekeepers undermine women's efforts in effective and productive political participation.*

Women who are already in technical or civil service encounter challenges when transitioning into the broader political landscape due to political gatekeeping issues stemming from godfatherism and attachments to power blocs. Respondents emphasised that women have less access to longstanding political networks, financial sponsorship, and influential power blocs. A respondent highlighted that women are often restricted to positions such as Women Leaders, while another noted that high campaign costs and limited access to networks make it difficult to secure opportunities. In the same instance, interview participants observed that the 35.0 percent affirmative action target “is not legally binding and rarely implemented” in practice. Several added that quotas create awareness but have little impact without political will, funding, and clear accountability systems. As a result, institutions continue to fall below representation benchmarks and treat gender inclusion as an optional, rather than mandatory, governance standard. These structural inequities restrict entry into political leadership and indirectly affect women in non-political governance pathways.

Policy actors and governance regulators are expected to institute gender policies and structures that enhance women's participation by subsidising sponsorships and encouraging the establishment of political networks that improve women's mentorship and facilitate their transition into the broader political landscape.

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