Gender Inclusion and Leadership Representation in Public Institutions: Implications for National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract
This study examined gender inclusion and leadership representation in public institutions and their implications for national development in Nigeria. The study sought to determine the extent to which gender inclusion promotes effective governance in public institutions, examine the contribution of women's participation in leadership positions to national development and identify the challenges affecting gender inclusion and leadership representation in Nigerian public institutions. The study was anchored on Liberal Feminist Theory and Representative Bureaucracy Theory and adopted the survey research design. The population comprised the estimated 1,865,000 residents of Port Harcourt metropolis, Rivers State. Using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula at a 0.05 level of precision, a sample size of 400 respondents was selected through a multi-stage sampling technique, while 386 copies of the questionnaire were successfully retrieved and analysed. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using frequency counts, percentages and mean statistics, with a criterion mean of 2.50 for decision-making. The findings revealed that gender inclusion significantly promotes effective governance by improving decision-making, transparency, accountability, public service delivery and fairness in public administration. However, cultural and traditional beliefs, gender discrimination, political interference, inadequate mentoring opportunities and weak implementation of gender equality policies were identified as major barriers to gender inclusion and leadership representation. The study concludes that strengthening gender inclusion and increasing women's leadership representation are essential for improving governance quality and achieving sustainable national development in Nigeria. It recommends stronger implementation of gender-inclusive policies, increased leadership opportunities for women and effective measures to eliminate institutional and socio-cultural barriers to gender equality.

Keywords: *Gender inclusion, leadership representation, public institutions, effective governance, national development, Nigeria.*

Introduction

Gender inclusion in leadership and governance has become a major concern in contemporary development discourse because of its significance for democratic governance, social justice, institutional effectiveness and sustainable national development. Gender inclusion refers to the process of ensuring that women and men have equal opportunities to participate in decision-making and occupy leadership positions across political, economic and social institutions without discrimination. Leadership representation extends beyond numerical participation to include meaningful involvement in policy formulation, governance processes and organizational decision-making. Evidence suggests that institutions characterized by inclusive

leadership are more responsive to citizens' needs, more accountable and better positioned to formulate policies that promote equitable development (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023).

The global commitment to gender equality has been reinforced through several international instruments and development frameworks. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development collectively recognize women's equal participation in leadership as both a human right and a prerequisite for sustainable development. Specifically, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, while Target 5.5 emphasizes ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life (United Nations, 2023). Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2024) argues that inclusive governance enhances institutional legitimacy, strengthens democratic participation and contributes to long-term human development.

Despite these international commitments, gender disparities in leadership persist across many countries. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2024) reports that although women's representation in national parliaments has improved steadily over the past two decades, women still account for only about one-quarter of parliamentary seats globally. Likewise, the World Economic Forum (2024) observes that political empowerment remains the widest gender gap worldwide despite significant improvements in education and health outcomes. These disparities are often attributed to entrenched socio-cultural norms, unequal access to education and economic resources, discriminatory institutional practices, political violence and limited opportunities for women's political participation, particularly in developing countries.

In Nigeria, successive governments have introduced policy initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in governance. The Federal Government adopted the National Gender Policy in 2006, which recommends a minimum of 35 percent affirmative action for women in appointive and elective positions (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2006). Nigeria is also a State Party to CEDAW and has committed itself to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. However, women's participation in leadership remains significantly below the recommended benchmark. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024), women occupy fewer than 5 percent of seats in Nigeria's National Assembly, while UN Women (2023) notes that women remain substantially underrepresented in executive appointments, public administration, local government leadership and other strategic decision-making positions. Persistent patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, limited political financing, electoral violence and weak implementation of affirmative action policies continue to constrain women's access to leadership opportunities.

The continued underrepresentation of women in leadership has important implications for governance and national development. Studies have shown that gender-inclusive leadership contributes to improved policy outcomes, greater transparency, enhanced institutional accountability and increased attention to social development priorities such as education, healthcare, poverty reduction and social welfare (OECD, 2023; UN Women, 2023). Consequently, gender inclusion is increasingly regarded not only as a matter of social justice but also as a strategic requirement for effective governance and sustainable development. Against this background, this paper examines gender inclusion and leadership representation in Nigerian public institutions and evaluates their implications for national development, with particular attention to the barriers limiting women's participation and the prospects for achieving more inclusive governance.

Statement of the Problem

Despite numerous international conventions, national policies and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting gender equality, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions within Nigerian public institutions. The continued dominance of men in decision-making structures has raised concerns regarding fairness, representation and the effectiveness of governance systems.

The low level of female representation in leadership positions may result in policies that inadequately address issues affecting women and other marginalized groups. Furthermore, cultural barriers, discriminatory practices and weak implementation of gender inclusion policies continue to limit women's participation in governance. This situation poses significant challenges to the attainment of inclusive development and democratic governance in Nigeria. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the impact of gender inclusion and leadership representation in public institutions and their implications for national development in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the impact of gender inclusion and leadership representation in public institutions on national development in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Determine the extent to which gender inclusion promotes effective governance in public institutions.
2. Assess the contribution of women's participation in leadership positions to national development.
3. Identify the challenges affecting gender inclusion and leadership representation in Nigerian public institutions.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent does gender inclusion promote effective governance in public institutions?
2. What contribution does women's participation in leadership positions make to national development?
3. What challenges affect gender inclusion and leadership representation in Nigerian public institutions?

Literature Review

Concept of Gender Inclusion

Gender inclusion refers to the deliberate integration of women and men into all aspects of social, political, economic and institutional life on the basis of equality, fairness and non-discrimination. It emphasizes the removal of structural, cultural and legal barriers that limit equal access to opportunities, resources and decision-making processes. Rather than focusing solely on increasing the number of women in leadership positions, gender inclusion seeks to create an enabling environment where both women and men can contribute meaningfully according to their abilities without being disadvantaged because of gender. The concept is closely linked to gender equality, human rights and social justice, all of which are recognized as prerequisites for sustainable development. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022) notes that gender inclusion promotes equal participation in governance, education, employment and public life by addressing discriminatory norms and institutional inequalities.

Globally, gender inclusion has become a major policy objective under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which advocates achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Inclusive societies benefit from broader perspectives in

decision-making, increased innovation and improved social cohesion. According to the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women, 2023), countries that adopt gender-inclusive policies are more likely to experience improvements in governance quality, economic productivity and democratic participation. In Nigeria, gender inclusion remains an important development concern due to persistent disparities in political participation, leadership opportunities, access to education and economic empowerment, making it a critical component of national development strategies.

Leadership Representation

Leadership representation refers to the proportion and diversity of individuals occupying positions of authority and decision-making within political, public and private institutions. It reflects the extent to which leadership structures mirror the demographic composition of society, including gender, ethnicity, age and other social identities. Gender representation in leadership has become a significant indicator of democratic governance because it ensures that the interests and experiences of both women and men are considered during policy formulation and implementation. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023), balanced leadership representation enhances institutional legitimacy, accountability and public confidence in governance systems.

Research has consistently demonstrated that organizations with diverse leadership teams often exhibit improved organizational performance, innovation and decision-making effectiveness. The World Economic Forum (2024) argues that greater female participation in leadership contributes to inclusive economic growth, improved governance and stronger institutional resilience. Similarly, UN Women (2023) maintains that equitable representation of women in leadership positions strengthens democratic institutions by promoting policies that address broader societal needs. Despite these benefits, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions across many developing countries, including Nigeria, due to socio-cultural norms, institutional discrimination, limited access to political resources and unequal opportunities for career advancement.

Public Institutions

Public institutions are government-established organizations responsible for implementing public policies, administering government programmes and providing essential services to citizens. These institutions include ministries, departments, agencies, public corporations, regulatory bodies, educational institutions, healthcare organizations and the judiciary. They constitute the administrative machinery through which governments perform their constitutional responsibilities and deliver public goods. According to the World Bank (2022), effective public institutions are fundamental to promoting accountability, transparency, service delivery and sustainable national development. Their effectiveness depends largely on competent leadership, institutional integrity and inclusive governance practices.

Beyond service delivery, public institutions play an essential role in promoting social equity, economic stability and democratic governance. Strong public institutions ensure equitable access to education, healthcare, justice, infrastructure and security while fostering citizen trust in government. The United Nations (2015), through Sustainable Development Goal 16, emphasizes the importance of building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Gender-inclusive leadership within public institutions enhances policy responsiveness by incorporating diverse perspectives into decision-making and improving institutional performance. Consequently, strengthening inclusiveness within public institutions remains central to achieving sustainable governance and national development.

National Development

National development refers to the comprehensive improvement of a country's economic, political, social, technological and institutional conditions aimed at enhancing the quality of life of its citizens. It extends beyond economic growth to include poverty reduction, equitable distribution of resources, improved education and healthcare, political stability, environmental sustainability, social justice and effective governance. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2024), national development is measured through multidimensional indicators such as the Human Development Index (HDI), which combines life expectancy, education and income to assess overall human well-being rather than economic performance alone. Modern development literature recognizes inclusive governance and gender equality as essential drivers of sustainable national development. The World Bank (2024) argues that countries that fully utilize the skills and contributions of both women and men achieve stronger economic growth, higher productivity and more resilient institutions. Likewise, the United Nations (2015) identifies gender equality, inclusive institutions and effective governance as interconnected pillars of sustainable development under the Sustainable Development Goals. In Nigeria, achieving national development requires strengthening public institutions, promoting equitable leadership representation, reducing gender disparities and ensuring that governance structures reflect the diversity of the population. Inclusive leadership therefore contributes significantly to economic transformation, democratic consolidation and long-term national progress.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Liberal Feminist Theory and Representative Bureaucracy Theory.

Liberal Feminist Theory

Liberal Feminist Theory was developed by Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) and further advanced by scholars such as John Stuart Mill (1869) and Harriet Taylor Mill (1851). The theory emerged from liberal political philosophy, which emphasizes individual rights, equality before the law, freedom and equal opportunities regardless of gender. Liberal feminists argue that women are as rational and capable as men and should enjoy equal access to education, employment, political participation and leadership positions. They attribute gender inequality primarily to discriminatory laws, cultural stereotypes, institutional barriers and unequal access to opportunities rather than biological differences.

The core tenets of Liberal Feminist Theory include the promotion of equal rights, equal opportunities, non-discrimination, merit-based advancement, educational empowerment and legal reforms aimed at eliminating gender inequalities. The theory advocates removing structural and institutional barriers that prevent women from participating fully in governance, leadership and decision-making processes. It maintains that public institutions should implement policies that promote equal representation and fair treatment for both men and women, thereby enhancing social justice and democratic governance.

This theory is relevant to the present study because it explains the need for gender inclusion and equal leadership opportunities for women in Nigerian public institutions as a strategy for promoting national development.

Representative Bureaucracy Theory

Representative Bureaucracy Theory was first propounded by J. Donald Kingsley (1944) in his seminal work *Representative Bureaucracy* and was subsequently expanded by Samuel Krislov (1974) and Kenneth J. Meier and Joseph Stewart Jr. (1992). The theory argues that public institutions perform more effectively when their workforce reflects the demographic characteristics of the society they serve. It distinguishes between passive representation, which refers to the demographic composition of public institutions and active representation, whereby

public officials advocate for the interests of the social groups they represent during policy formulation and implementation.

The core tenets of Representative Bureaucracy Theory include diversity in public employment, equitable representation of social groups, inclusiveness in leadership, responsiveness to citizens' needs, fairness in policy implementation and improved institutional legitimacy. The theory posits that when women and other underrepresented groups are adequately represented in leadership positions, public institutions become more responsive, accountable and effective in addressing the diverse needs of society. Gender-balanced leadership therefore contributes to better governance outcomes, enhanced public trust and sustainable national development.

This theory underpins the study by explaining that increased gender representation in leadership positions within Nigerian public institutions can improve policy responsiveness, inclusive governance and ultimately contribute to national development.

Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design because it enabled the collection of data from a large number of respondents regarding their perceptions, attitudes and experiences concerning gender inclusion and leadership representation in public institutions. The population of the study comprised the estimated 1,865,000 residents of Port Harcourt metropolis, Rivers State. Using Taro Yamane's formula at a 0.05 margin of error, a sample size of 400 respondents was determined and selected for the study. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed whereby selected communities within the metropolis were first identified, after which respondents were chosen through simple random sampling to ensure equal representation. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed by the researcher, consisting of demographic questions and items measured on a four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages and mean scores, while decisions were based on a criterion mean of 2.50. Out of the 400 copies of the questionnaire administered, 386 were correctly completed and returned, representing a response rate of 96.5%.

Data Presentation

Table 1: Extent to which Gender Inclusion Promotes Effective Governance in Public Institutions

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1	Gender inclusion improves decision-making processes in public institutions.	182	118	52	34	3.16	Accepted
2	Inclusion of women enhances transparency and accountability in governance.	169	126	57	34	3.11	Accepted
3	Gender-diverse leadership contributes to better public service delivery.	156	121	71	38	3.02	Accepted
4	Gender inclusion promotes fairness and equity in public sector administration.	143	110	84	49	2.90	Accepted
5	Equal participation of men and women has no effect on institutional performance.	48	62	121	155	2.01	Rejected
	Grand Mean					**2.84**	**Accepted**

Table 1 presents respondents' perceptions of the extent to which gender inclusion promotes effective governance in public institutions. The findings show that four out of the five statements recorded mean scores above the criterion mean of 2.50 and were therefore accepted. Specifically, respondents accepted that gender inclusion improves decision-making processes

in public institutions (Mean = 3.16), enhances transparency and accountability in governance (Mean = 3.11), contributes to better public service delivery through gender-diverse leadership (Mean = 3.02) and promotes fairness and equity in public sector administration (Mean = 2.90). However, respondents rejected the statement that equal participation of men and women has no effect on institutional performance (Mean = 2.01), implying that they believe gender participation positively influences institutional effectiveness.

Table 2: Contribution of Women's Participation in Leadership Positions to National Development

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1	Women's leadership contributes to social and economic development.	176	124	51	35	3.14	Accepted
2	Female leaders promote inclusive policies and programmes.	164	132	56	34	3.11	Accepted
3	Increased representation of women supports sustainable national development.	171	119	60	36	3.10	Accepted
4	Women's participation in leadership promotes democratic governance.	149	117	73	47	2.95	Accepted
5	Women's leadership has little contribution to national development.	39	55	136	156	1.94	Rejected
	Grand Mean					**2.85**	**Accepted**

Table 2 examines respondents' opinions on the contribution of women's participation in leadership positions to national development. The results reveal that respondents accepted four of the five statements, indicating strong support for the positive role of women in leadership. They agreed that women's leadership contributes to social and economic development (Mean = 3.14), promotes inclusive policies and programmes (Mean = 3.11), supports sustainable national development through increased representation (Mean = 3.10) and enhances democratic governance (Mean = 2.95). Conversely, the statement that women's leadership has little contribution to national development was rejected with a mean score of 1.94, suggesting that respondents overwhelmingly disagreed with this assertion. The grand mean of 2.85 demonstrates that respondents generally believe that greater participation of women in leadership positions contributes significantly to Nigeria's national development.

Table 3: Challenges Affecting Gender Inclusion and Leadership Representation in Nigerian Public Institutions

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1	Cultural and traditional beliefs limit women's access to leadership positions.	181	122	50	33	3.17	Accepted
2	Gender discrimination affects women's career advancement in public institutions.	173	128	53	32	3.15	Accepted
3	Political interference reduces opportunities for qualified women.	162	126	63	35	3.08	Accepted
4	Existing gender equality policies are adequately implemented in Nigerian public institutions.	58	71	118	139	2.13	Rejected
5	Lack of mentoring and leadership development programmes affects women's advancement.	168	123	59	36	3.10	Accepted
	Grand Mean					**2.93**	**Accepted**

Table 3 presents respondents' views on the challenges affecting gender inclusion and leadership representation in Nigerian public institutions. The findings indicate that respondents accepted four statements as major challenges to women's participation in leadership. These include cultural and traditional beliefs that limit women's access to leadership positions (Mean = 3.17), gender discrimination affecting women's career advancement (Mean = 3.15), political interference reducing opportunities for qualified women (Mean = 3.08) and inadequate mentoring and leadership development programmes affecting women's advancement (Mean = 3.10). However, respondents rejected the statement that existing gender equality policies are adequately implemented in Nigerian public institutions (Mean = 2.13), indicating their perception that such policies are either poorly implemented or ineffective. With a grand mean of 2.93, the results suggest that respondents generally agree that several socio-cultural, institutional and political factors continue to hinder gender inclusion and leadership representation in Nigerian public institutions.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question One: To what extent does gender inclusion promote effective governance in public institutions?

The findings of this study revealed that gender inclusion significantly promotes effective governance in public institutions. Respondents agreed that gender inclusion improves decision-making processes, enhances transparency and accountability, promotes better public service delivery and strengthens fairness and equity in public administration. The rejection of the statement that equal participation of men and women has no effect on institutional performance further demonstrates respondents' belief that inclusive governance contributes positively to institutional effectiveness. These findings suggest that when women are adequately represented alongside men in public institutions, governance becomes more participatory, transparent and responsive to citizens' needs. The findings are consistent with the submissions of UN Women (2023), which reported that gender-inclusive governance enhances institutional accountability, improves public trust and produces more inclusive policy outcomes. Similarly, the World Bank (2024) argued that institutions with greater gender diversity are more innovative, transparent and effective in delivering public services because they benefit from broader perspectives during policy formulation and implementation. The findings also support OECD (2023), which observed that diversity in leadership strengthens institutional legitimacy and improves the quality of public sector governance. These outcomes equally validate the assumptions of Liberal Feminist Theory, which emphasizes equal participation in leadership as a means of promoting institutional efficiency and democratic governance.

Research Question Two: What contribution does women's participation in leadership positions make to national development?

The study found that women's participation in leadership positions contributes significantly to national development. Respondents agreed that women leaders promote social and economic development, formulate inclusive policies and programmes, support sustainable national development and strengthen democratic governance. The rejection of the statement suggesting that women's leadership contributes little to national development indicates strong confidence in the developmental role played by women in leadership positions. These findings imply that increased female representation in leadership contributes not only to better governance but also to broader national development outcomes.

These findings corroborate the World Economic Forum (2024), which reported that countries with greater female participation in leadership experience higher economic productivity, improved innovation and stronger institutional performance. Likewise, the United Nations Development Programme (2024) emphasized that empowering women and increasing their

participation in decision-making contribute significantly to sustainable development and improved human development outcomes. The findings are also consistent with those of UN Women (2023), which concluded that women's representation in leadership enhances inclusive policymaking, promotes social justice and accelerates progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, the findings support Representative Bureaucracy Theory, which argues that institutions function more effectively when leadership reflects the diversity of the population they serve.

Research Question Three: What challenges affect gender inclusion and leadership representation in Nigerian public institutions?

The findings further revealed that several factors continue to hinder gender inclusion and leadership representation in Nigerian public institutions. Respondents identified cultural and traditional beliefs, gender discrimination, political interference and inadequate mentoring and leadership development opportunities as major obstacles to women's advancement into leadership positions. In addition, respondents rejected the assertion that existing gender equality policies are adequately implemented, indicating that although relevant policies exist, their implementation remains weak and ineffective. These findings demonstrate that institutional and socio-cultural barriers continue to restrict women's access to leadership positions despite growing advocacy for gender equality.

The findings agree with the World Bank (2024), which identified discriminatory social norms, institutional barriers and unequal access to economic and political opportunities as major constraints to women's leadership globally. They also support UN Women (2023), which observed that weak implementation of gender equality policies, cultural stereotypes and inadequate institutional support remain significant impediments to women's political and administrative participation, particularly in developing countries. Similarly, the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2024) noted that despite gradual progress, women remain underrepresented in leadership due to persistent structural inequalities and discriminatory practices. These findings further reinforce Liberal Feminist Theory, which attributes gender disparities to institutional discrimination and advocates legal and policy reforms that ensure equal opportunities for women in governance and public administration.

Conclusion

This study examined gender inclusion and leadership representation in public institutions and their implications for national development in Nigeria. The findings established that gender inclusion significantly enhances effective governance by improving decision-making, promoting transparency and accountability, strengthening public service delivery and fostering fairness in public administration. The study further revealed that women's participation in leadership positions contributes meaningfully to national development through the promotion of inclusive policies, democratic governance, social progress and sustainable development. These findings affirm that achieving gender balance in leadership is not merely an issue of social justice but also a strategic requirement for strengthening public institutions and accelerating national development.

The study also found that cultural and traditional beliefs, gender discrimination, political interference, inadequate mentoring opportunities and weak implementation of gender equality policies remain major barriers to women's representation in leadership positions within Nigerian public institutions. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate institutional reforms, effective enforcement of gender-inclusive policies, leadership development programmes for women and sustained advocacy against discriminatory socio-cultural practices. The study therefore concludes that increasing gender inclusion and leadership

representation in public institutions is essential for improving governance quality, promoting institutional effectiveness and achieving sustainable national development in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government should strengthen and enforce gender-inclusive policies to promote equal participation in leadership and decision-making in public institutions.
2. Public institutions should increase women's representation in leadership through merit-based appointments, mentorship and leadership development programmes.
3. Government should address cultural, institutional and policy barriers that hinder gender inclusion by ensuring effective implementation of gender equality policies.

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