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Lilies among thorns: Structural patriarchy and the throes of women-politicians in Nigeria's political space

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ABSTRACT

Despite breaking barriers and going against odds to secure elective positions in Nigeria's male-dominated political landscape, female politicians have continued to be caught in the web of structural/institutionalised patriarchy. While much academic energy has been spent exploring the socio-cultural, political, economic and institutional barriers to women's political participation in Nigeria, there is a need to examine the dilemma faced by those women who have emerged. Therefore, this study examines the throes of selected notable female politicians in Nigeria's male-dominated political space. Data for this study were obtained from secondary sources through an exploratory research design with a qualitative approach. In particular, the study drew on newspaper articles, editorials, journals, and internet materials. Findings revealed that many female politicians have fallen victim to structural patriarchy and the shenanigans that characterise Nigeria's political space. These women have either been harassed, abused, impeached or suspended under questionable and unjust circumstances, thereby raising the question of the conduciveness of Nigeria's political space. The effect of such victimisation is the discouragement of other women from seeking elective positions, which would entrench Nigeria's existing imbalance in political representation. Thus, reforms and mechanisms should be implemented to adequately protect the minority, particularly females, in Nigeria's political space. Cases of harassment and abuse should be investigated, while perpetrators should be punished irrespective of their positions. This would encourage more women politicians to seek elective office.

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Introduction

In Nigeria, the participation of women in politics has remained low despite continued advocacy. Dating back to the pre-independence era through the present Fourth Republic, politics in Nigeria is male-dominated and laden with cultural norms, patriarchal ideas and other exclusionary traditional practices that hinder women's full participation in politics. Over the years, democratic transition and the various advocacies for gender parity, particularly in the political space, have opened space for women's participation; however, compared to men, their representation both in elective and appointive offices is

quite insignificant (Vande, 2025; Osimosu & Adefisoye, 2023; Adamu, 2023; Adefisoye, 2023).

Sustained by socio-cultural beliefs and stereotypes, party structure, electoral violence and God-fatherism, the continuity of male dominance in Nigeria's political landscape has disproportionately hindered women's equal participation in politics, thereby relegating women to the private sphere. Consequently, the few women who dabbled into the political space are often seen as a 'round peg in a square hole', making their participation a difficult task (Braithmoh, 2025; Agboola & Alade, 2025). Studies like Adefisoye (2023), Agboola & Alade (2025) and Ojo (2025) have explored the various barriers to the participation of women in the political terrain in Nigeria, such as cultural and religious impediments, financial limitations and structural challenges; however, there is less focus on the experiences of women who have successfully navigated the challenges of securing an elective or appointive political position. This gap in the literature conceals the lived experiences of female political office holders, as women's access to political office does not translate directly into acceptance and equal treatment in the political space. This study is significant for this reason.

Among other things, female political office holders are often embattled with both mild and obvious resistance, which includes sexual harassment, demeaning speeches and write-ups, impeachment, suspension, and exclusion from important decision-making processes (Ndung & Machue, 2022; Rusta et al., 2024). According to Matfess et al. (2022), these can be largely attributed to the low level of women's representation in the political space and the patriarchal structure of society. Based on the foregoing, there is a need to critically question the inclusiveness and fairness of Nigeria's political landscape while exploring the challenges faced by female political office holders and women politicians. Accordingly, this study aimed to explore the challenges faced by female political office holders who, through appointment or election, have secured political positions in Nigeria. The study analyses the lived experiences of selected female politicians to uncover the channels that reinforce male dominance and the political structures that limit women's authority and tenure in office. The throes of Hon. Patricia Olubunmi Etteh (the sabotage of Nigeria's first female Speaker); Senator Abiodun Olujimi (displacement, godfatherism, and the struggle for senatorial survival); and Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan (sexual harassment, Senate suspension, and the weaponisation of ethics) present intriguing case studies for this analysis.

The paper is divided into six sections. The section after the introduction presents the theoretical underpinning. The study draws on feminist political theory and intersectionality theory. The third section reviews the literature on women's political participation and representation, including gender and political representation in Nigeria; patriarchy and political culture in Nigeria; and an overview of women's political participation in selected African countries. The fourth section briefly presents the methodology, while the fifth section presents case studies of selected female politicians in Nigeria. A cross-cutting analysis also identifies patterns across the three cases in section five. Section six concludes and makes recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

This study relies on feminist political theory and intersectionality theory. Feminist political theory combines feminist theory and political theory. The background for the theory was laid by early feminist thinkers - Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) and John Stuart Mill (1869). The theory explores gender issues in decision-making, agency and political institutions. The feminist political theory posits that the political corridor is not gender-neutral; it is heavily laden with patriarchy, exacerbating women's marginalisation in leadership (Jatula & Adesanya, 2024). The theory explains that barriers to women's participation in politics transcend established rules and structures; it also includes norms, values and practices that strengthen male dominance (Sapkota & Dahal, 2022). The theory highlights how political institutions reproduce gender inequality even as women gain access to political representation (Benstead, 2020). The feminist political theory has, however, been criticised by Weiss (2018) for underplaying differences in human realities based on class, sexuality, region and race.

To complement feminist political theory, this paper adopted intersectionality theory. The intersectionality theory was propounded by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. In this study, intersectionality theory emphasises the interconnectedness of gender with other social identities in shaping human experience (Crenshaw, 1991). Importantly, female politicians in Nigeria are unfavourably exposed to multiple layers of marginalisation coupled with gender discrimination. Intersectionality theory is therefore a viable framework for analysing the differential impact of political victimisation on female politicians within Nigeria's muddy political terrain. These theories provide a theoretical background for the study, enabling a detailed analysis of the structures that shape the experiences of women who hold or have held political office in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Issues around women's political participation and representation have attracted academic discussion across the globe. In Africa and particularly in Nigeria, the intersection of various factors, patriarchy, culture, political violence and religion makes the political terrain hostile for female political actors. Several scholars like Omotayo & Fakorede (2025) and Adamu (2023) have explored the barriers limiting women's involvement in politics; however, little has been done on the lived experience of the few women who have secured elective and appointive positions in Nigeria's political space.

Structural/Institutionalised Patriarchy

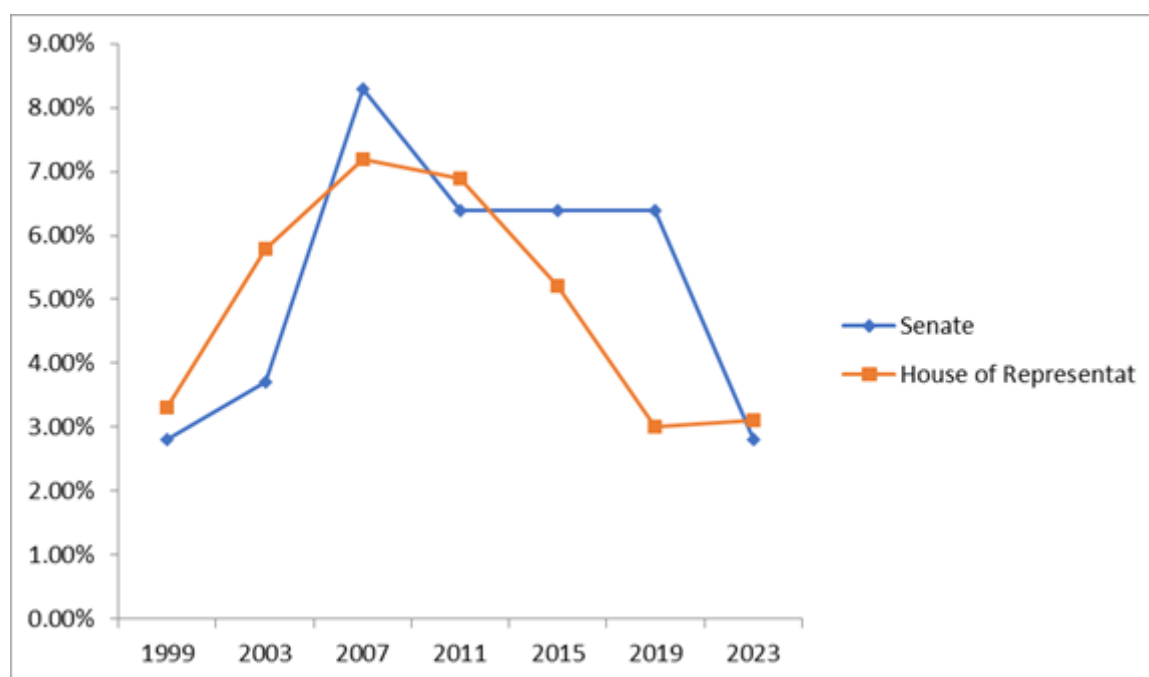
The concept of structural/institutionalised patriarchy explains patriarchy beyond interrelationships to include the social, political, economic and institutional strategies through which male dominance is strengthened and reproduced. Patriarchy, according to Tukura & Suleiman (2024), is a system that ingrains the existing unbalanced gender power relations within institutions. According to Farias et al. (2023), structural/institutionalised patriarchy is a system of gender-based hierarchy in which power is primarily held by men and influences structural aspects of society. From this perspective, institutional rules, resource inequalities and culturally entrenched roles for women in public life strengthen the marginalisation of women in the political terrain. Ette & Akpan-Obong (2022) revealed that enforcing political equality does not necessarily guarantee equal access to political power, as institutional constraints continue to shape women's political authority and opportunities even after they gain political seats.

Importantly, to correctly analyse women's participation and representation in politics in Africa, an understanding of the structural forms of patriarchy is significant. Supporting this view, Motsage (2023) argued that investigating women's political participation requires focusing attention on institutional practices that reinforce the exercise of unhealthy political power. This perspective is particularly relevant in Nigeria, as patriarchal norms often intersect with other factors like political party structures and financial constraints, among other things, to shape female political office holders' experiences. Thus, structural patriarchy in the context of Nigerian women political office holders suggests that women may have the right to contest elections and hold office while still facing institutional arrangements that make political participation difficult. The concept, therefore, highlights the need for a paradigm shift from merely analysing barriers to women's political participation to examining resource allocation, opportunity distribution and gender power relations in the political sphere.

Gender and Political Representation in Nigeria

Over the years, the relationship between gender and political representation has been a focus of academic discussions. However, notwithstanding the questions and advocacy raised by these discussions, Nigeria has continued to record low female representation in governance. Although women constitute about half of the world population, Ono & Endo (2024) noted that women's representation in elective and appointive political positions remained low. Historically, women in Nigeria have actively contributed to political movements; however, since independence, women have been excluded from formal politics due to social norms and barriers (Adamu, 2023).

In Nigeria today, women's representation in key political institutions remains low despite the 35% affirmative action set by the National Gender Policy of 2006. This can be attributed to various factors, among which are lack of finance, strict party structures, societal expectations and political violence, which often prevent women from actively pursuing political positions (Adamu, 2023; Vande, 2025). Despite several policies, treaties and conventions that promote increased female representation in governance, implementation remains weak (Likinyo & Arum, 2025). However, with constant push for reform in the political arena in Nigeria, including the use of gender quota and inclusive electoral processes, Nigeria has witnessed gradual improvement (though insignificant) in the level of women's political representation.



Source: Adefisoye (2023)

Figure 1: Female Representation in Nigeria National Assembly 1999-2023

Figure 1 above shows an increase in female representation in the National Assembly (Senate and House of Representatives) between 1999 and 2007, though the increase was insignificant (Adefisoye, 2023). However, numbers declined consistently from 2011 through the 2023 elections. Representation fell from 6.61% in the 2015 general election to 5.65% in the 2019 general election, then to 4.17% in the 2023 general election, before declining further to about 3%. Despite the representation of women in parliament, women's voices remain unheard due to their small numbers.

Patriarchy and Political Culture in Nigeria

Patriarchy is a system that promotes male dominance and exploitation over women. According to Obaoye & Wenli (2022), patriarchy, male dominance over women, is the bedrock for gender inequality, which is deeply rooted in socio-cultural structures that shape the Nigerian political terrain. Vande (2025) and Agboola & Alade (2025) stated that patriarchy is a structure that projects male dominance and authority, particularly in decision-making, access to and control over resources and leadership. However, Nigeria's traditional leadership system allowed complementary gender roles, with figures such as Iyalode, Iyaloja and Olori, among others, giving women a voice in decision-making (Ogunbunmi, 2025). However, colonial rule altered this by enforcing male authority in political leadership (Tukura & Suleiman, 2024). This, however, informed the present political pattern, in which leadership is inherently masculine (Kucici & Buratai, 2025).

Studies like Vande (2025) and Tukura & Suleiman (2024) exploring the Nigerian political terrain highlighted the informal impact of patriarchy, such as godfatherism and party hierarchies, among others. Kucici & Buratai (2025) also stated that patriarchy forms the background for women's marginalisation in the political corridor, inhibiting their access to financial resources and party nominations, thereby presenting key institutions as male-dominated. Similarly, Fasiku et al. (2025) and Agboola & Alade (2025) emphasised that social and cultural beliefs and gendered divisions of labour hinder women's political ambition, thereby reinforcing male participation as the norm. However, the increasing involvement of civil society and the media through advocacy and lobbying is challenging existing gender norms and promoting inclusivity (Obaoye & Wenli, 2022). Although patriarchy continues to hold sway in politics, gradual and noticeable institutional and cultural change, driven by increased awareness and policy reforms, is renegotiating gender roles within Nigeria's political landscape (Chiluwa, 2024).

Analysing godfatherism as a structure that has dominated Nigerian politics, Vande (2025) emphasised that godfathers control party structures, finance campaigns and ultimately determine the electoral outcome. However, female aspirants without a godfather are excluded from participation, while those who have one are forced to do their godfather's bidding (Vande, 2025). The godfatherism structure limits female

politicians' independence and agency, even after they secure political positions, whether through election or appointment.

Women's Political Participation in Selected African Countries

Given the need for an analytical framework for women's political participation in the Nigerian context, it is pertinent to explore their political representation in selected African countries. Rwanda, according to Fan (2024), has recorded over 60% female political representation in the parliament and 50% in cabinet positions. This feat of increased female participation in governance was achieved through constitutional review and the adoption of 'reserved seat' and 'party quotas' strategies (Annen & Asiamah, 2023). However, Fan (2024) and Chiazor (2025) argued that Rwanda's high female representation is merely substantive, with little political power, because it coexists with authoritarian governance and limited policy influence.

Uganda has seen increased women's political representation since adopting affirmative action (40% reserved seats) in 1989 (Tumwine & Klomegah, 2026). Despite women holding 34% of parliamentary seats, male dominance remains clear (Muzee, 2023). Female representation in Uganda is seen as mere numbers, as women are often faced with significant barriers (patriarchy, economic and educational inequality and political party dynamics) that limit their full political participation (Ejang et al., 2026). Notably, the few women holding political office are often relegated to minority roles, while men hold key positions (Yadav, 2023; Muzee, 2023).

In Mozambique, women's political participation has made considerable progress, with over 40% representation in parliament and about 40% holding ministerial positions (African Development Bank Group, 2025). This was achieved with the adoption of the quota system. However, despite laudable strides in enhancing women's representation in politics through the ratification of relevant policies and conventions, patriarchy, party structures, and socioeconomic inequalities, such as family obligations, education, and income disparities, still limit women's equal participation in the political arena (Samba, 2024; Da Beatriz, 2024). Distinguishing between representation and substantive representation, Goetz (2003) argued that women's representation in politics goes beyond mere presence; it means empowering women to act in areas that matter to protect the interests of fellow women. Applying this principle, Khan (2025) argued that, beyond numbers, the few women who have secured seats in the legislative arm of government often lack authority and the necessary support to advance women's agenda.

The increase in women's political representation in South Africa largely stems from the adoption of a voluntary party quota. Prior to the transitional elections in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) adopted a 30% quota, which resulted in a 'zebra list' system, alternating male and female candidates on their lists of parliamentary candidates, thereby raising women's representation in parliament from below 4% to about 27% soon after (Myakayaka-Manzini, 2004). Women's representation in South Africa, however, is still uneven across the political spectrum, with opposition parties like the Democratic Alliance explicitly objecting to party quotas as being against the party's ideology, thereby creating significant differences between the presence of women in different parties in a given parliament (Vyas-Doorgapersad & Shava, 2022). This implies that voluntary party quotas on women's representation, unlike constitutional mandates, are not guaranteed, as they rely primarily on the political will of the party adopting them.

In 2010, Senegal enacted a comprehensive gender parity law that required political parties to alternate men and women on all electoral lists, resulting in a major increase in female representatives from 23% to 43% between 2007 and 2012 (Tøraasen, 2017). This legal equality, according to Tøraasen (2019), led to the symbolic acceptance of women's political leadership, as evidenced by a modest shift in elites' attitudes. In addition, the parity law faced organised opposition from religious authorities, which mobilised against its full implementation during the 2014 local elections in a country that is 95% Muslim (Tøraasen, 2017). The Senegal case exemplifies how religious and cultural authority structures outside state institutions can impede the full implementation of the legal quota.

Women's political representation in Kenya remains limited despite strong constitutional backing. The "two-thirds gender rule", as enshrined in Article 27(8) of the 2010 Constitution, requires that no more than 2/3 of the members of any elective or appointive body be of the same gender (Agutu, 2017). However, the rule has remained dormant for over 10 years since its pronouncement, and Parliament has yet to pass the necessary legislation to implement it, despite the Supreme Court's 2012 deadline (Agutu, 2017). According to Ombwori (2019), no legislation was enacted to implement Article 27(8), which remains a constitutional provision that is not effectively enforced. Kenya's case, however, presented a constitutionally mandated but never implemented gender threshold. Therefore, successive parliaments, which are male-dominated, have refused to enact the very mechanism that would lead to a gender-balanced composition.

Evidence from the countries above revealed that women's inclusion and representation in politics can be mere window dressing, with little or no impact on decision-making processes, and, in Kenya's case, can remain unrealised even where the constitutional commitment itself is unambiguous. Across Africa, the adoption of the quota system has gotten many women a seat among the male elites, but with a voice that goes a little above a whisper, being constrained by various vices. Notably, the mechanism adopted (and whether it is genuinely implemented), dictates what type of limitation is experienced in practice: Constitutionally entrenched quotas implemented in practice, in Rwanda and Senegal, have led to more durable numerical gains, although they can be susceptible to authoritarian co-optation in the former country or religious resistance in the latter; Voluntary party quotas that are implemented in practice have resulted in stronger representation within the party that adopts them, as in South Africa and Mozambique, but have left national outcomes uneven and dependent on continued party dominance; Reserved-seat affirmative action, in Uganda, have led to rapid numbers gains, and persistent questions have been raised over the independence and grassroots legitimacy of the resulting mandate; and unenforced, constitutionally entrenched quotas, such as in Kenya, have shown that a guarantee on paper is not enough without the political will of an incumbent, male-dominated legislature to give them legislative backing. The picture is not entirely different in Nigeria, where the lack of any binding national gender quota mechanism, aside from patriarchal social attitudes, explains why there is no sign of significant and meaningful improvement in the representation of women in elective office.

Methodology

Research Design

The research adopted an exploratory, qualitative approach. This exploratory approach is suitable because relatively little research focuses on the in-office experiences of women politicians in Nigeria, rather than barriers to women's political entry. Exploratory research is especially appropriate when investigating phenomena that are new or relatively unknown, to gain a deeper understanding of phenomenon patterns and dynamics, and to help develop a foundation for additional empirical investigations. The qualitative approach also provides a more sophisticated, context-specific analysis of women's lived political experiences that quantitative analysis may not capture, including socio-cultural and institutional dimensions.

Sources for data and methods of collection

This study used only secondary data, relying heavily on newspapers, editorials, and peer-reviewed articles. This was due to two factors: the sensitivity and political nature of the subject matter, and the practical challenges of interviewing high-profile political figures for primary data. The secondary sources include newspapers (electronic) to capture real-time event coverage, public response and immediate political consequences; editorials, which provided analytical perspectives on the events surrounding the selected case studies and offered insights into public discourse and the framing of these women's experiences within Nigeria's socio-political commentary; published peer-reviewed articles on gender, politics, and women's political participation in Nigeria and Africa, from which common trends across the literature were identified; and internet materials. The study used purposive sampling to select case study participants (including Patricia Etteh, Senator Abiodun Olujimi, and Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan) and the documents reviewed. The case studies were selected based on their prominence, media visibility and the availability of documented materials about their experiences. The documents reviewed for each selected case were identified through keyword searches across Nigerian newspaper archives, online news platforms, and academic databases for peer-reviewed articles.

Data Analysis Approach

Themes were extracted from the data collected and analysed using qualitative content analysis. The data analysis process was in stages. First, selected documents were read and organised per case study to establish a timeline of events. Second, a line-by-line open coding was carried out to identify significant statements, actions, and reactions, assigning codes as issues emerged from the data (removal from office, party sanction, media characterisation). Third, the codes were grouped into broader thematic categories by comparing the cases reviewed to identify areas of convergence and divergence. Finally, the authors validated the identified themes by checking for consistency. If a theme was reported by at least two independent sources, it was retained; claims from single sources were cross-examined against peer-reviewed articles to establish reliability.

Limitations of the Study

Relying on secondary data, this study has some limitations. Hence, reliance on media and the internet can introduce bias, as sources may exhibit political, editorial, or ideological biases that influence not only reporting but also interpretation. This study addressed this limitation by treating media framing as an object of analysis. The reviewed data sources were written specifically to either defend or advocate for the affected politician. This highlights the risk of hindsight and confirmation bias in the coding process, as the sources are more likely to foreground evidence of victimisation and gender bias while downplaying other narratives of the same event. The cross-source validation processes were therefore adopted to mitigate this risk. However, the absence of primary data limits the study's ability to document firsthand accounts of the selected female politicians' experiences, and the researchers may not fully understand the circumstances surrounding the reported events. The purposive selection of case studies worked well for exploratory work but does not ensure the results are generalisable to all female politicians in Nigeria, as the experiences studied may not represent women in less prominent political roles. However, despite these limitations, triangulating secondary data from different sources, coupled with structured coding and a validation procedure, strengthened the credibility and reliability of the results by enabling systematic cross-examination of reported events across sources.

Case Studies of Selected Female Politicians in Nigeria

This study identified and selected three notable female politicians in Nigeria - Patricia Etteh, Senator Abiodun Olujimi, and Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan, whose political careers revealed distinct but related patterns in the experience of women who have attained high political office in Nigeria. Using a detailed literature review of their experiences, this study applied intersectionality theory to examine how gender intersects with other social factors and to determine the experience of each case studied. The study also provides a cross-sectional analysis of the experiences and challenges faced by the few women who have attained political office in the legislature. The study situated each case within the theoretical frameworks (feminist political theory and intersectionality theory); it also analysed the cases in the light of academic discourse on gendered political violence.

Hon. Patricia Olubunmi Etteh: The Sabotage of Nigeria's First Female Speaker

Patricia Olubunmi Etteh is a Yoruba politician from Ikire, Osun State. Although originally trained as a hairdresser and beauty therapist, Etteh dabbled in politics and secured the ticket to represent Ayedaade/Isokan/Irewole federal constituency in the House of Representatives (1999 – 2011). Marking history, the election of Patricia Etteh as the Speaker of the Nigerian House of Representatives in July 2007 was monumental, as she was the first woman to hold a position in a legislative chamber in Nigeria. Her appointment was celebrated globally, as it highlighted Nigeria's progress towards gender parity. James (2025) posited that it signalled women's acceptance within a historically male-dominated political space. However, shortly after becoming the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Etteh was allegedly accused of misappropriating about N628 million in public funds used for the renovation of her official residence and her deputy's (Sanni, 2022). An investigative committee led by Aminu Tambuwa, established the allegation and recommended her removal from office. However, Etteh resigned as Speaker on 30 October 2007 after serving for about five months, making her tenure the shortest in the history of the National Assembly (Sanni, 2022).

Reporting on the allegation of misappropriation by Etteh, Agunbiade (2025) argued that the expenditure fell within the budgetary allocation for the office of the Speaker and did not contradict previous spending patterns of her male predecessors, who were never alleged to have misappropriated funds or tried in the same manner. Etteh's successor, Dimeji Bankole, was equally accused of N9 billion misappropriation, N2.3 billion on vehicle procurement and a N10 billion personal loan, yet he served his complete four-year term without interruption (BBC News, 2011; Joshua & Oni, 2014). Agunbiade (2025) therefore argued that Etteh's removal from office was a ploy by male legislators who did not want a woman occupying the third most powerful constitutional position in Nigeria. In a similar vein, Etteh's allegation of financial misconduct can be said to be a patriarchal instrument of conspiracy to discredit her. Ibekwe (2025), establishing structural patriarchy, decried the short time within which the investigation was concluded, as this contrasts with the institutional process of investigation when it involves male lawmakers. This lack of due process in handling the case, and the committee's refusal to grant her a fair hearing, highlights Palmieri et al.'s (2021) comparative observation that women in leadership positions are rarely given the same presumption of innocence as their male counterparts.

Furthermore, Etteh's case equally assumed gender framing in the media, as major newspaper reports consistently highlighted her gender alongside the allegation levied against her. The Punch Newspaper (2007) stated that "I find it rather sad that the first woman Speaker would engage in the act. We are disappointed and embarrassed by that. The expectation that a woman will bring a motherly instinct to management of our resources is shattered" (Punch 9 September 2007:43, in Eshiet, 2013). These portrayals suggest women are not ready or capable of handling such a sensitive position, thereby exacerbating existing gender disparities in politics and leadership (Eshiet, 2013). Furthermore, these findings suggest that breaking the glass ceiling, particularly in a deeply entrenched political system, may not challenge the existing power structure but instead create only an insignificant shift in internal arrangements. Consequently, Etteh's case had a profound effect on women's political ambition in Nigeria, as marked by her removal from office and the swiftness of the investigation, thereby sending negative signals to women with political ambitions about the slim prospects of success. This deterrence effect on female aspirants was identified by Krook (2017) as a subtle form of political violence against women.

Senator Abiodun Olujimi: Displacement, Godfatherism, and the Struggle for Senatorial Survival

Senator Abiodun Olujimi's political career spans the executive and legislative arms of government, positioning her as a prominent political figure in Ekiti State and across Southwest Nigeria. Senator Olujimi of Ekiti State began her career in broadcasting and journalism before venturing into politics. Olujimi served as a Deputy Governor of Ekiti State under the Governor Ayodele Fayose-led administration between 2005 and 2006. She subsequently served in the upper house of the legislature representing Ekiti South Senatorial District (Aluwong, 2022). Olujimi's political trajectory exemplifies a political world of possibilities and strong barriers to women's political advancement in a male-dominated environment.

Olujimi's tenure as Deputy Governor of Ekiti State was marked by political unrest. Her impeachment alongside the governor placed her in a vulnerable position. Basically, Olujimi's impeachment can be classified as weaponisation of constitutional removal mechanisms (Fagbadebo, 2020). Notably, the Nigerian Constitution (Section 188) allows for the impeachment of deputy governors only on grounds of gross misconduct. However, Olujimi's removal from office, according to Agi (2009), was not based on misconduct but on serving the interests of male factional leaders. Olujimi's political career significantly exposed the impact of godfatherism on female politicians. Aina-Pelemo & Olujobi (2025) argued that female politicians face structural barriers that require them to rely on godfathers before they can thrive in the political corridor.

Significantly, Olujimi's political career depicted the true hold of godfatherism on female politicians. Ette & Akpan-Obong (2022) asserted that in Nigeria, female politicians face systemic barriers as they need political godfather(s) to survive in the political terrain. However, female politicians' patronage of godfathers is often weaponised against them when they deviate from their godfather's wishes. Olujimi's political trajectory portrays the shenanigans of the dominant political party in Ekiti State, revealing how women's political agency is constrained by the marginalised position they occupy within patron-client networks. Olujimi's case revealed an intersection of gender with the intra-party patronage system, as her vulnerability can be explained as an attack on her competence.

Olujimi's political career also navigated complex inter-party and intra-party dynamics. Her senatorial candidacy battles, as well as the primary election controversies, exemplified what Ette & Akpan-Obong (2022) described as the efforts of male political party gatekeepers who control access to elective and appointive positions, which often inhibit female politicians' success in the political world. Similarly, Fasiku et al. (2025) stated that women face political challenges in regional politics similar to the patriarchal power structures in formal electoral politics. Despite the obstacles, Senator Olujimi sponsored and co-sponsored significant legislative bills, particularly on issues affecting women, such as gender equality and equal opportunity bills. Her experience illustrates the tension identified by Goetz (2003) and Childs and Krook (2008) between the energy female legislators must expend to survive politically and the energy available for substantive policy work on behalf of women constituents. Female politicians' constant need to manage political threats often diverts their attention and resources from the legislative agenda they were elected to pursue. This represents one of the significant consequences of political violence against women that is rarely recognised (Krook, 2017).

Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan: Sexual Harassment, Senate Suspension, and the Weaponisation of Ethics

Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan was elected as a senator representing Kogi Central Senatorial District during the February 2023 general election. She contested and won the Senate seat under the umbrella of the

People's Democratic Party. Akpoti-Uduaghan's election was widely celebrated by gender advocates because she had earlier unsuccessfully contested in previous elections. Her triumph was seen as a mark of persistence and a victory over structural barriers that limit women's political careers (Women News Today, 2024). Natasha's victory was more significant because she was from Kogi State, which had been known for an overconcentration of political power in the hands of a few male elites and harsh political power play (Ileyemi, 2023). However, Natasha's election results were strongly challenged by political opponents for a reversal of her victory through the tribunal. Contesting election outcomes by female politicians seems to put women in financial difficulty, exacerbating the already existing financial gap between men and women (Savitha, 2018). However, Natasha's electoral victory in the 2023 general elections was upheld. Nevertheless, in February 2025, Akpoti-Uduaghan's senatorial career suffered a significant blow when she publicly alleged in an interview (Arise TV, Friday, February 28, 2025) that Senator Godswill Akpabio had sexually harassed her. Onyjuwe (2025) and Unini (2025) reported that Akpoti-Uduaghan alleged that her refusal to comply with Akpabio's sexual advances resulted in her being denied committee seat assignment as a mechanism to silence her in the parliament (Oyem, 2026). Subsequently, the Senate Ethics Committee initiated legal proceedings against Akpoti-Uduaghan instead of conducting a thorough investigation into the harassment allegation. She was then placed on a six-month suspension as punishment for her misconduct during a plenary session of the House (Ogundapo, 2025). Akpoti-Uduaghan's suspension, which came immediately after her allegation of sexual harassment, was therefore interpreted by activist groups and gender advocates as a retaliatory tool to silence her while posing a warning to other female senators (Adesanya, 2025; Adabembe, 2025).

Adopting the Krook & Sanin (2020) framework on Violence against Women in Politics, the use of institutional mechanisms (motion for suspension, violation of standing rules) to silence female political office holders is a form of political violence against women. This aims at disciplining the victim or complainant while protecting the accused. Palmieri et al. (2021) noted that investigating cases of sexual harassment in the legislature without engaging independent external investigators will lack credibility, as the accused can influence the process that determines the outcome. Akpoti-Uduaghan posited that she was intentionally denied committee seat assignment, which is one of the major duties of her elected office, due to the allegation of sexual harassment she levied on Akpabio. In a cross-national study by Saaka & Yayah (2024), it was reported that in West Africa, female legislators are often assigned to committees with less policy impact and lower status than their male counterparts, limiting women's capacity to substantively represent their constituencies. Hence, when committee assignment decisions are controlled by a (male) presiding officer with documented animus toward a particular female member, the scope for discriminatory treatment is obvious.

The Akpoti-Uduaghan case generated heated discussion, particularly within civil society, women organisations and lawyers alike, who framed her suspension as an attack on women's political rights (Omotayo & Fakorede, 2025). This highlights Fallon's (2008) observation that celebrated cases of political violence against women can serve as a springboard for advocacy and activism on women's rights, particularly in politics, thereby generating a united front. Similarly, social media activism and campaigns drew both national and international attention to the case. On the other hand, the case equally attracted counter-narratives that downplayed Akpoti-Uduaghan's claim of sexual harassment by attacking her character, questioning her credibility and political capability (Baqau, 2025). This, according to Bardall et al. (2019), was a common response to the few women who had, at one point or another, challenged male dominance and authority. The conflicting responses to Akpoti-Uduaghan's allegation of sexual harassment against Akpabio showed the extent to which gender dynamics in Nigerian politics are mediated by partisan calculations.

Akpoti-Uduaghan's case can be situated within the broad pattern of violence against women in politics. However, what distinguished her case from earlier occurrences of violence against women in politics was the high level of visibility and the popularity of the case due to social media attention. The social media popularity of the case made the details of the proceedings - including the institutional inaction on her allegation of harassment and the speed of action of her suspension - accessible to both national and international audiences (Adeboye, 2025). Krook (2017) argued that political violence against women serves as a deterrent for other women as it transmits signals on the risk of political engagement. Akpoti-Uduaghan's six-month suspension was perceived by prospective female candidates as a consequence of asserting her rights within the Senate, thereby teaching other female political office holders to avoid confrontation and accept marginalisation in silence (Ogundapo, 2025; Onochie et al., 2025) rather than challenge demeaning treatment by their male counterparts. This, according to Oyem (2026), represented the ultimate aim of

structural patriarchy from the perspective of those who seek to maintain male dominance in Nigeria's political arena. Akpoti-Uduaghan's case reflects the intersection of gender and her membership in the opposition party, leaving her with little or no institutional coverage.

Cross-Cutting Analysis: Patterns across the three cases

A comparative analysis of Etteh, Olujimi and Akpoti-Uduaghan revealed significant recurring patterns. Structural/institutionalised patriarchy was evidently used as a formal tool to legitimise harassment ranging from financial misconduct to impeachment and the adoption of an ethics tribunal. This confirms Fagbadebo's (2020) thesis of adopting impeachment as a weapon while highlighting the inadequacy of analysis of political violence from the viewpoint of evident and physical forms of violence against women in politics. These women faced challenges not only because they were women but also because of political party dynamics. This confirms the relevance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) to this study, as it explains how various factors intersect to shape individuals' experiences in a given context. However, the experiences of these women revealed the gender dimension of their challenges – Etteh's seemingly unpreparedness to handle the seat of power; Olujimi's exploitation in a godfather-dominated system; and the sexual harassment allegation by Akpoti-Uduaghan – distinguish them as endangered species in Nigeria's political terrain.

An analysis of the three cases revealed that the institutional frameworks that were supposed to protect these women failed due to the strong grip of patriarchy or structural lapses. These frameworks include constitutional due process, intra-party grievance mechanisms, and other legislative processes, among others. These three cases affirm the feminist political theory position that political institutions are not gender-neutral, but instruments for wielding political power. Each subject in the case study was victimised through the formal mechanisms of the very institutions they were part of: the House of Representatives Ethics Committee in Etteh's case; the Ekiti State House of Assembly's impeachment proceedings in Olujimi's case; and the Senate Ethics Committee and plenary suspension process in Akpoti-Uduaghan's case. In these instances, constitutional or procedural instruments designed to promote accountability were weaponised to achieve the goal of male leadership.

An intersectional analysis of the cases also revealed the interconnection of various identities to determine their experiences. First is Etteh's Yoruba identity and her alignment with a particular faction of the People's Democratic Party (PDP); second, Olujimi's entanglement in the volatile godfatherism network of Ekiti State factionalised politics and third, Akpoti-Uduaghan's emergence in Kogi State with an authoritarian political environment. All these intersect with gender to shape the forms of violence they experienced. The findings of this study, therefore, highlight a systemic failure in Nigeria's protective institutions despite the existence of several institutional structures. The findings revealed that several mechanisms – intra-party grievance systems, constitutional due process, legislative ethics and even civil society watchdogs are all inadequate to protect these women or hold their persecutors accountable. However, these institutional failures seem intentional as a scheme to continually enforce patriarchal values, formal rules notwithstanding.

The findings also affirm the deterrence mechanism of violence against women in politics, according to Krook (2017) and Bardall et al. (2019). The publicity around the celebrated cases of Etteh, Olujimi and Akpoti-Uduaghan signals to prospective female political aspirants seeking elective positions that being elected to a political position is not enough; there is a likelihood of institutional persecution. The likely consequence is a further entrenchment of Nigeria's existing gender imbalance in political representation, as talented and ambitious women rationally calculate that the personal, professional, and psychological costs of political participation outweigh the probable rewards.

Conclusion

This study examined the trials of selected female politicians in Nigeria's male-dominated political space, focusing on Honourable Patricia Olubunmi Etteh, Senator Abiodun Olujimi and Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan. The study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design drawing from secondary sources of data collection – articles, newspapers and internet materials, among others. The study revealed that overcoming barriers to securing an elective position is not enough, as women still need to contend with structural/institutionalised patriarchy and shenanigans that are aimed at removing, silencing or delegitimising them.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study recommends the following:

- i. The Federal Government of Nigeria should ensure constitutional and legislative reforms that adequately protect minorities in the political space.

- ii. Political parties should review and reform party processes and internal democracy to reduce the influence of godfathers in the political arena.
- iii. National Assemblies and State legislatures should establish independent, externally supervised mechanisms to investigate allegations of harassment, abuse or misconduct by political office-holders, rather than relying on existing in-house committees under the control of the chamber leadership.

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