



Nigeria: Women and Electoral Politics in 2023 —

Charting the Way Forward



BRIEFING PAPER

Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), Abuja

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Introduction

As Nigeria enters a new general election season — with political parties already conducting local congresses ahead of primaries next year— what prospects lie ahead for Nigerian women interested in seeking political leadership positions?

Women have remained a vastly underrepresented minority in the halls of political power throughout Nigerian history. Since the resumption of electoral democracy in 1999, public campaigns, proposed legislative reforms, and internal measures within political parties have attempted to address the gaping gender imbalance. Yet assessments of the performance of female candidates in Nigeria's most recent general elections revealed a disturbing trend: women's representation in elected and appointed office has not only failed to increase but appears to be in decline.

As part of its wider interest in understanding the nature of electoral democracy and citizen participation in Nigeria, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) commissioned a series of studies on women's participation following Nigeria's 2019 elections. The first of these, entitled

[How Women Fared in the 2019 Elections](#) considered the scale and performance of women candidates in the last general elections. The second, ['Gendered Contests: Women in Competitive Politics: An analysis of womens participation in the 2019 Nigerian general elections](#), conducted alongside John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism, pursued a mixed-methods approach to assess how both subjective perceptions and objective factors contributed to the dramatic under-representation of women among those who campaigned for elected office in 2019.

A third study, conducted in partnership with African Polling Institute (API), sought to examine Nigerians' attitudes towards both female candidacy in elections in general and the performance of women candidates who contested in the 2019 polls. This primarily quantitatively study, entitled *Women in Nigerian Politics: A citizen's perception survey on the attitudes of Nigerians towards female candidates in the political space*, surveyed 7,396 persons (roughly 49% female and 51% male) between September 2019 and



June 2020. Conducted using a stratified quota sampling technique, it covered all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, offering a robust, nationally representative sample exploring citizen's perceptions of women's participation in electoral politics.

The data and insights generated by these assessments have increased our understanding of the interplay of factors that serve to constrain women's representation in elective and appointed office. However, beyond their analytical interest, this research can also help us chart different paths forward; opening-up new possibilities for reversing the deepening gender imbalance in Nigeria's national politics. This summary briefing pursues three primary aims.

First, it offers a high-level summary of the key findings of the studies, reflecting on how women fared in Nigeria's most recent polls. Secondly, it aims to synthesise the insights unearthed by both approaches to identify specific bottlenecks that appear to limit women's political prospects. Thirdly, ahead of the commencement of the 2023 campaign season, the briefing draws out several practical interventions which partners and policymakers might consider implementing in their programmes and interventions. In concluding, the briefing highlights further areas that lie beyond our current comprehension where further research into women's political participation in Nigeria is needed.

Findings

New opportunities, lingering challenges

Despite the prevailing challenges facing women in Nigerian politics our studies offer some reasons for optimism. 86% of respondents said they would vote a woman into public office, while 85% of those polled thought that women would bring about positive changes in society through sound public administration. The same percentage of respondents strongly affirmed the proposition that women could bring change to society if elected to public office. While survey responses of this sort may be conditioned by social desirability biases, such high levels of expressed support for the increased

role of women in political leadership bear interesting implications. They suggest that societal norms often presumed to explicitly exclude women from political participation might either progressively be losing strength or may not be as widespread as has often been assumed. Indeed, the strong positive association respondents felt between women's leadership and improved public administration might even suggest that the constituencies who would actively support female candidates may be larger than is often assumed.





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However, one of the most striking findings of CDD's recent series of studies on the issue is that women's political representation has steadily declined in recent electoral cycles. According to our Women in Nigerian Politics report, 45% fewer women took office across all levels in 2019 than they did in 2011, marking women's poorest electoral outing since 2003. In 2019, women won less than 5% of all contested seats and were restricted to only 17% of all ministerial appointments. What accounts for the persistent paucity of women's political representation in Nigeria?

Would you vote a woman into public office?

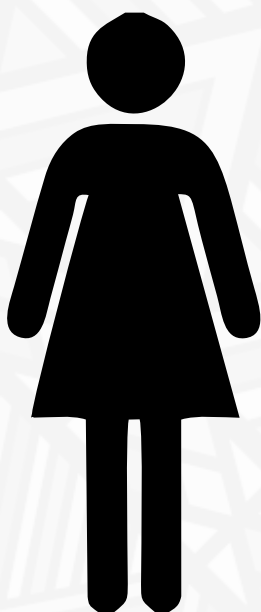
14%
NO



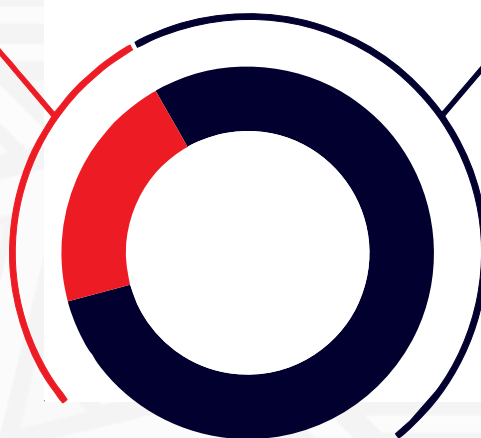
86%
YES



Do you think women can be good leaders?



15%
NO



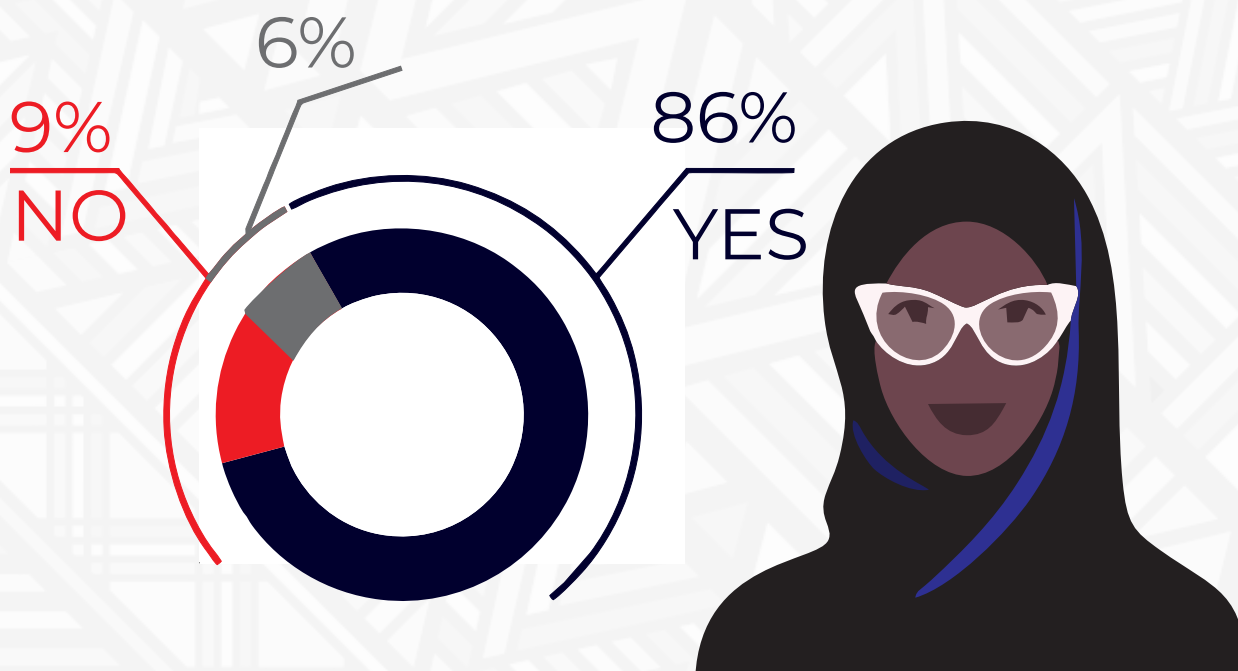
85%
YES





04

Do you think women can change society if elected?



A partial answer seems to lie in the sheer lack of women candidates on the ballot paper. Of the 26,137 candidates that contested in the 2019 election, only 2,970, — or 11% — were women. This dearth of female candidates suggests

an obvious if often overlooked point: women's exclusion in each new electoral cycle occurs long before election day.

Table 1 Female elected positions per party

Positions	Total Candidates	No. of positions	Elected APC	Elected PDP	Elected ADP	Elected APM	Elected AA	Elected APGA
President	73	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vice President	73	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Senate	1,904	109	35	0	0	0	0	0
House of Rep	4,680	360	8	2	0	0	0	1
Governor	2,412	36	0	0	0	0	0	0
Deputy	2,412	36	2	2	0	0	0	0
State Assembly	14,583	944	12	26	1	3	2	1
Total	26,137	1,487	26	36	1	3	2	2



Another partial reason relates to the nature of the party platforms which are most likely to enable women contestants to get on the ballot. Our studies found that the vast majority of women candidates ran for office under the banner of “third” parties — that is, parties other than the two largest political parties, the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Indeed, of the 232 female candidates that stood for senatorial contests across Nigeria, only 17 were candidates of the APC or the PDP. Other national electoral races had even higher proportions of third-party women candidates: nearly 94% of women candidates for the House of Representatives were from third parties, while, of the six women contestants for presidential office, no contender belonged to the APC or the PDP.

On one hand, the proliferation of parties other than the APC and the PDP — there were 89 alternative parties in the 2019 election — has provided more opportunities for women to emerge as electoral candidates. Qualitative interviews with women political candidates also pointed to the fact that smaller parties can provide a more flexible space for newly emerging female candidates to build electoral experience and a grassroots base outside of the traditional, more competitive party platforms.

However, the higher proportion of female candidates in smaller parties has in fact deepened women's electoral marginalisation, since the vast majority of these parties either failed to attain any elective seats or ultimately

suspended their candidacies and backed one of the two dominant parties. Although 91 political parties participated in the 2019 general elections, most women who emerged winner in their races contested under the platforms of the two main parties — and a good number of women who contested under the two ruling parties were ultimately successful. Indeed, 44% (23 out of 52) and 45% (31 out of 68) of female candidates who vied for elective positions on APC and PDP tickets respectively, won their elections. Of the women who ran for office on the platforms of the remaining 89 parties, only 6 out of 2,850 female candidates (0.21%) were successful. Since third parties have yet to carve out substantial electoral bases, women candidates running on such platforms can also suffer from the credibility problems that more generally plague these parties. Indeed, this may account for why in our national surveys, 52% of voters who admitted to not having voted for a female candidate said that they did so because they did not believe that woman candidates stood a chance of winning. This suggests that rather than providing an alternative path to power, smaller parties may so far be serving only to either co-opt or dissipate the energies and resources of the majority of Nigeria's few women candidates.

Strikingly, our study reveals that Nigerians are either uninformed or in denial about the gender disparities in Nigeria's recent electoral races. Despite evidence of structural impediments faced by women candidates seeking office in Nigeria, 58% of our respondents felt that women





candidates fared “OK” or “better than OK” in the 2015 general elections. Only 14% of respondents rated women's performance in the last election as poor. This demonstrates a lack of citizen knowledge regarding gender imbalance in politics, which contributes to the disparity between the public's positive opinions toward female leadership and the poor track record of electing women to government. It follows that this ignorance obscures or downplays the urgency or importance of increasing the number of women elected to positions of authority.

Geopolitical variations in political trends were also observed. Fewer women are involved in political processes, both as candidates and the electorate, in northern states. According to the data, the north-west particularly had significantly fewer respondents who voted for women candidates at 11% compared to the national average of 24%. The region also had the highest percentage of respondents (26%) who do not believe that female candidates have the capacity to govern. Though this perspective was still a minority view, it is worth noting and may reflect the lingering effects of cultural or religious norms that exclude women, particularly in a wider regional context marked by religious extremism and

insecurity.

Another possible explanation for the decline in female political aspirants is the growing prevalence of violence, intimidation, and vote-buying in Nigerian elections. 57% of respondents who witnessed incidents of violence and intimidation during the previous election believed that male politicians were the sponsors of the violence. Aside from that, incidences of vote-buying by politicians were also recorded, with the plurality of respondents (46%) believing that male politicians were the sponsors of vote-buying – though this likely also reflects that fact that there are a lot more male politicians running on the tickets of the leading political parties. Women are regularly threatened with physical violence during the campaign or electioneering process and often consider dropping out of the race as a result, according to qualitative perspectives from women candidates. In light of this, women's diminished likelihood to participate as electoral candidates is thus likely also shaped by the fact that they are more often than men forced to bear the consequences of electoral violence. as family caregivers.





Analysis

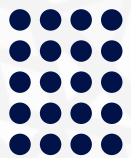
A 'Supply' and a 'Demand' problem?

Read together, the findings of both of our recent studies tell a slightly paradoxical story. On one hand, substantial percentages of Nigerians both seem willing to support women candidates and believe that women would be good leaders. On the other hand, not only are there a decreasing number of women getting elected, but the most electoral viable parties also have the lowest proportion of women candidates. What accounts for this high level of subjective support for women candidates amid low levels of women candidacies?

Constraints on internal democracy among Nigeria's governing political parties have continued to pose severe limitations to popular candidates. The fact that party chieftains and godfathers frequently impose candidates of their choice is a significant barrier not only to deeper democratisation in general but to women's political advancement in particular. Party primaries — particularly those of the two main parties — appear to be one of the central culprits in this conundrum. In Nigeria, candidate selection within dominant parties is even less reflective of the will of the general populace than general elections. Notwithstanding the well-known irregularities associated with internal party processes, most registered voters do not have an influence on party primaries, and as

such, the candidates that emerge from these contests and who are then presented as options to the electorate, do not necessarily reflect the preferences of the general electorate. Thus, even if the wider electorate is increasingly amenable to women candidates, candidate selection processes within dominant parties will determine whether more women are even presented to the electorate as an option on election day.

One direct manner in which candidate selection processes disadvantage women is through the high cost of nomination forms required for those wishing to compete in primaries. Even though both major parties offered incentives for women in the 2019 elections, reducing the cost of nomination forms for female aspirants either by in the case of the APC, or waving the nomination fee entirely, as the PDP did, which retained only the expression of interest costs, the two dominant parties still produced only a handful of women candidates nationally. Furthermore, the waiver of nomination fees has been ineffectual, with testimonial evidence indicating that women are referred to as "free candidates" because they are entitled to forms free of charge regardless of their ability to fund their campaign, which is another significant and exclusionary cost to consider when running for office. Additional



interventions, such as grants for female aspirants to support their campaign activities, are needed to ensure women can compete on a more level financial playing field.

Furthermore, dominant parties tend only to conduct direct primary contests for presidential elections. This means that party primaries for most other elective positions are more vulnerable to having their outcomes influenced by wealthy and powerful party leaders. Indeed, party oligarchs can more easily sway the handful of delegates to vote for the candidates of their choosing than would be feasible were candidate selection left up to a larger number of party members.

As women candidates recounted in qualitative interviews for our research studies, the bypassing of direct primaries remains one of the key structural obstacles that disadvantages popular contestants (particularly women) in favour of candidates deemed more pliant by party elite. Thus, while patriarchy, in general, remains a barrier for women in Nigerian politics, it is the patriarchs in particular — and their influence on candidate selection — which create one of the most direct bottlenecks to the political advancement of women.

Aside from the needed reforms in party politics and electoral processes, there remain some social biases that need to be addressed. Despite the increased perception of women's potential contribution to politics, the aforementioned dataset reveals that a

small, but noteworthy portion of the population, particularly men and older generations, still hold gender biases. Further advocacy is required to tackle these attitudes. Coupled with this are widespread misconceptions, and ignorance, regarding the gender imbalance in politics.

Female candidates in Nigeria frequently face a lack of accurate media coverage to reflect both the growing public acceptance of women's political leadership and women's continued exclusion particularly from internal party processes. Gender-sensitive training for media practitioners is needed to support the creation and use of non-stereotypical, balanced, and diversified images of women in politics in media reporting. Media advocacy on the deficit in female electoral participation is also needed to counter the identified ignorance amongst the populace.

The key conclusion drawn from our data is that gender biases may be exaggerated. Economically speaking, the issue may be the “supply” of women candidates (and even the “strategic supply” of women candidates on the platforms of the ruling parties), more than the “demand” for women candidates. The focus of remedial efforts should be both on channeling public support for women candidacies towards more direct demands for women's inclusion and on increasing the number of women nominated with a particular emphasis on resolving barriers encountered before and during internal party procedures.



General recommendations for getting more women into power:

If public acceptance of female political leadership is indeed increasing, then the democratisation of candidate selection processes — including party primaries and particularly within dominant parties could provide one important avenue for increasing the representation of women in electoral politics in Nigeria. Concretely, this could mean paying much closer attention to the candidate selection practices of the dominant parties, as well as pursuing legal sanctions when it is clear — [as was the case in](#) Zamfara in 2019 — that prospective female candidates have been excluded from the selection process.

Likewise, monitoring and whistleblowing the failures of parties to implement agreed upon internal minimum quotas for women candidacies at national, state, and local levels, could go some way in propelling ambitious female politicians to the forefront. The fact that most respondents (both male and female) in

both studies agreed that the establishment of a minimum quota for women in electoral politics would be acceptable, means that parties can be encouraged to see such mechanisms as a means to broaden rather than weaken their appeal to a wider citizenry. Quota systems should be enacted into law to ensure electoral gender parity; therefore, female party leaders should form pressure groups and lobby for same. The Independent National Election Commission (INEC), as the regulatory body, should continue to collaborate with development partners to encourage and sensitise political parties to the issue of gender balance.

Furthermore, given their recognised role in influencing candidate selection, engaging with party oligarchs to commit to supporting (rather than blocking) women candidacies in internal selection processes can provide an at least symbolic indication to relevant party apparatchiks that women's political leadership is desirable.

Our studies suggest several critical learnings that can aid in increasing political opportunities for women, especially in elective positions.

These are as follows:

Promoting internal party democracy within the two leading parties is central to opening space for women.

How positions are contested within the two leading parties in Nigeria should more seriously be considered in ongoing advocacy aiming to improve the representation of women in elective and non-elective positions. Although smaller political parties had more women as their candidates, the two leading parties should be prioritised in our advocacy for space for women in political positions. It is therefore imperative to support the development of an effective internal mechanism for gender representation. Specifically, there is need for the dominant parties to establish and implement internal rules that support affirmative action or gender quotas in elective and appointive positions.



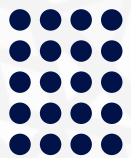
Lesson Learned

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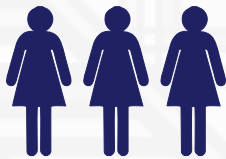
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Gender advocacy should specifically target primary races, particularly within the two dominant parties, replacing a nearly exclusive focus on general election contests.

Furthermore, senior party officials with formal and informal influence should be identified and persuaded to commit to supporting, rather than opposing, female candidacies in internal selection processes. Targeted pressure from development partners (from “above”) can reinforce popular advocacy (from “below”) specifically aimed at senior party officials to push this agenda forward.

Our findings also suggest that “top-down” approaches to women's representation advocacy should be rethought.



Female candidates, even in the smaller parties, performed better in elections into state legislative chambers compared to executive positions at national and state levels or to legislative positions at national level. Of the 59 female candidates who won elections in 2019, 40 of them contested for the State Houses of Assembly. Thus, instead of focusing solely on elective positions at the national or executive levels, it would be more useful to also engage state-level party structures. Eventually, it would be hoped that the reform process at the local levels will have a multiplier effect on women representation at the national level.

Strengthening the capacity of smaller parties is critical for improving women's representation.



Most women stood on the ticket of smaller parties even though this reduced their chance of election victory. However, some female candidates did manage to win seats contesting for the All Progressives Grand Alliance, the Action Alliance, African Democratic Congress and Allied Peoples Movement. Thus, alongside engagement with dominant parties, support for smaller parties can enhance women's chances in local elections.

There is a connection between the state of women's representation and the absence of a legal framework for improved representation.

It is important that collectively the 9th National Assembly is engaged to pass the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill, (HB131 to create additional special seats for women in the federal and state legislative houses. If passed into law, these legislations will strategically and constructively increase female representation.



The establishment of 35% gender quotas in the constitution and manifestoes of political parties can be a mutually reinforcing strategy.

Parties should also be encouraged to undertake gender audits of the implementation of such commitments that are made available to the public ahead of elections. In addition, civil society should systematically review such audits, reporting on parties who are either adhering or reneging on gender quotas.

Any quota legislation must include provisions empowering INEC to sanction parties who do not meet the minimum requirement.

For the implementation of proposed quotas in the party and national legislation to be successful enforcement is needed. Currently some parties have introduced gender quotas in their party documents, however this is rarely implemented. The enforcement of such implementation by the electoral umpire would strengthen women's inclusion.

Specific recommendations for getting more women into power:

Civil Society, Women's groups, and Development Partners

Any serious intervention should start early to achieve better electoral outcomes. Starting early would mean both proactively targeting advocacy efforts to coincide with dominant party candidate selection processes and documenting how women fair in the upcoming party primaries in the 2022 electoral cycle.

Strengthening and creating support networks for women politicians such as the Women in Politics Forum, will serve to reinforce existing women-led initiatives. There is a strong need to further build synergy among groups working on women's political participation. Pooling together skills, and resources, both technical and financial, and learning and sharing will impact positively on achieving women's objectives. Women's groups must build cohesion, trust, respect, and support for each other to accomplish set goals. To be successful, the engagements of such groups must also involve men.

The provision of financial aid to women running for office should be increased to address the perennial challenge of lack of access to financing. Elect Her, and the Women Trust Fund are both organisations focused on granting financial support to female aspirants. However, there is a need to increase support for these types of initiatives ahead of elections in 2023.



Party grants to support female aspirants' campaigns are necessary to assure the success of existing efforts. Despite party subsidy initiatives to reduce the cost of “nomination” and “expression of interest” forms, the prohibitive cost of elections still make participation difficult for women and more such interventions are needed.

Successful advocacy efforts will likely need to identify, capacitate, and negotiate to get more women into power. Concerted efforts should increasingly concern identifying and encouraging potential women aspirants. This should be complemented by developing the capacity of identified aspirants to run for office. To further support these efforts civil society, donors and relevant stakeholders should engage and negotiate with political parties to grant more space and opportunities for women ahead of the 2023 general elections.

Media and regulatory bodies

Stakeholders must adopt a more nuanced approach to media profiling of women candidates in elections. There is a need for more tailored messaging to promote the key roles and contributions made by women in the country. This should not be limited to politics and the economy but should include peacebuilding and importantly highlight other work and roles assumed by women in the country.

Media advocacy should be used to highlight the challenges and opportunities faced by female political aspirants to combat widespread ignorance and to attract young people — including young women — into politics. Raising awareness about the hurdles faced by women in electoral politics will help galvanise constituencies that understate the urgency of electing women candidates despite being open to women's political leadership.

State and federal electoral management bodies should develop procedures for men and women to bring to light instances of gender-based misconduct or discrimination. When it is apparent that prospective female candidates have been barred from the selection process, violators should face sanctions and legal penalties.

Given the recognised impact of electoral violence in discouraging women's political participation, it is important that all peace pacts signed during elections include a pledge of non-violence against women. Violence against women and girls is a widespread and endemic form of human rights violation in Nigeria. It manifests itself in physical, sexual and psychological ways, which go largely unreported for fear of stigmatisation, shame and impunity. There is a need for strict implementation of all existing laws and policies in the country's rule book and an end to impunity. It is also essential that more resources are devoted to gender-based violence including comprehensive data gathering.



The National Broadcasting Commission should also establish an effective mechanism to combat sexist language and gender stereotyping during the campaign season.

Media codes of ethics include provisions prohibiting the use of discriminatory or sexist language and images would be an important step. Further efforts should be made to extend the flagging of misogynist language and hate speech into social media forums which are increasingly a site of abuse for women.

Further research

Our studies emphasise the importance of data to aid our understanding of the challenges that prevent a more equitable distribution of political office across genders. Though the 2019 elections have yielded a wealth of new evidence to strengthen our comprehension of these processes, further qualitative and quantitative data would provide us with an even clearer picture of specific areas of intervention that might reverse the current trend.

For instance, noting the importance of candidate selection for shaping the options voters are presented with on election day, it would be instructive to better understand the extent to which women are currently participating in party primaries and what might be preventing interested women from even competing in the first place. Further work should also explore how women who have managed to be selected in dominant party primaries were able to succeed and to document what can be learned from their experiences. Furthermore, where explicit barriers are placed against women candidates, the ways in which these are contested at the local level

should be explored as they can shed light on the ways in which women themselves are creating the conditions for the shifting public perceptions of the suitability of female leadership in Nigeria politics.

Finally, the impact of indigeneity on women's political participation is another aspect for consideration in further research. Married women who are resident but not 'indigenes' in their husband's home states – an increasingly frequent occurrence — face political exclusions by virtue of still being considered 'settlers' despite their obvious ties to their new home states.

Our research so far highlights the importance of recognising that a multiplicity of bottlenecks exist when it comes to women's political participation and that we must continue to explore, question and reaffirm our current understanding that party candidate selection processes may play a greater inhibitory role than popular perceptions of women's political participation in Nigeria.
