Democratization and Gender Equality: Comparative Study of Women Empowerment in Nigeria and Ghana

Eboh, R. A[1], Orhero, A.E[2] & Apuyor, R.A[3]

[1,2,3]Department of Political Science, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the relationship between democratization and gender equality by analysing and comparing women political empowerment in Nigeria and Ghana. Despite the further spread of democratic governance in both countries since the 1990s, the political participation of women is still substantially under-represented in political leadership and decision-making processes. The study employs a qualitative research method and comparative research approach, relying on secondary data, institutional structures, and statistics of women representation in the Parliament.

Results indicate that both countries have seen opportunities for political participation as a result of democratization, but not gender equality as such. The representation of women in Nigeria is still very low, averaging below 6% in the National Assembly while the representation of women in Ghana is still high but not satisfactory, ranging from 8% to 15%. The study highlights several prominent factors that hinder women's political participation, such as entrenched patriarchal norms, institutional weaknesses, lack of financial resources and the male dominated party structure. Additionally, the analysis shows that Ghana's recent Affirmative Action Act (2024) offers a solid legal basis for gender inclusion, while the gender policies in Nigeria are policy-based and weak. Study concludes that for gender equality, there should be deliberate institutional reforms and socio-cultural transformation in addition to the process of democratization. It calls for enacting binding gender quota laws, making their implementation more robust, providing more funding and institutional support to women, and continuing to take action to change discriminatory cultural norms. This research makes a contribution to the literature as it offers a comparative analysis of the issue of gender and democratization in West Africa and gives policy-relevant insights in how to improve women's political participation and inclusive governance.

Keywords: Democratization, Gender Equality, Women Empowerment, Political Participation, Nigeria, Ghana, Governance

INTRODUCTION

International conventions place a high priority on the need for men and women to have equal rights and opportunities, including in political processes. Women are the majority in the world, and their role in the development of society is significant, both as caregivers, laborers, managers of the household, community leaders, and political activists (Banjo, 2023; Aulia, Marzuki, Suyato, Arpannudin, 2024). In the context of Politics defined as "the authoritative allocation of values," conflict can arise when groups feel they are excluded or when they feel injustice. Democracy is an approach that tries to find a solution to these tensions, through inclusiveness and those women and men participate in governance in an equal manner and collaborate together (Ediba, Umar, Geoffrey, 2024; Nwabueze, 1993).

Development is the ultimate goal of democracy, which is based on the principles of freedom, justice, equality and inclusive participation (Aluko, Aluko, & Ogunjimi, 2022). Gender inclusion is a key element of sustainable democracy and policymaking, as women constitute almost half of the population and are directly involved in government decision-making processes, if genuine democratic governance is to be ensured (Sanchez-Soriano, Arango-Ramirez, Perez López, & Garcia-Montalvo, 2024; Ediba et al., 2024). Thus, the concept of gender equality has emerged as a key pillar of the global democratic and development agendas, such as the Millennium Development Goals (Ediba et al., 2024).

Women are still highly marginalized in politics, despite efforts towards democratization in Nigeria and Ghana. The return of democracy in Nigeria in 1999 revealed that there were gender disparities in political representation. The government's ratification of frameworks like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1989) and the adoption of policies such as the National Policy on Women (2000) and National Gender Policy (2007) have not resulted in better representation of women in political institutions. Women are still facing some deep-rooted cultural stereotypes, lack of access to education, poor infrastructure, lack of campaign resources, and discriminatory social norms that still limit their political engagement (Aluku et al., 2022). Women with disabilities are even more excluded because of weak support systems and lack of educational access, with violence, poverty and social isolation also making it less tempting for women to be politically engaged.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative comparative research design based on documentary and secondary-data analysis. Nigeria and Ghana were selected because both are West African states that have experienced sustained electoral democratization since the 1990s, yet they display different levels of women's parliamentary representation and different approaches to gender-inclusion reform. The comparison therefore treats democratization as a common institutional context while examining variation in the legal, party, socio-cultural and enforcement conditions that shape women's access to elected office.

Criteria for Data Collection and Source Selection

Data were collected from four categories of sources: (i) official parliamentary and electoral records; (ii) authoritative international databases, particularly the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Parline; (iii) official government policy and legislative documents; and (iv) peer-reviewed scholarly literature on gender, democratization and political representation. Sources were selected where they provided identifiable dates, parliamentary totals, numbers or percentages of women, descriptions of legal instruments, or evidence concerning institutional and socio-cultural barriers. Preference was given to primary and institutional sources for numerical and legal claims, while peer-reviewed studies were used to interpret causal and structural explanations.

Data Verification and Quality-Control Procedure

Parliamentary representation figures were verified by checking the number of women against the reported size of the chamber and recalculating percentages where necessary. Where figures differed across sources because of election timing, vacancies, by-elections or changes in membership, the study identifies the source and reporting period rather than combining incompatible observations. In particular, the original Ghana table contained an apparent transcription error for 2017–2021 (3 women and 13.1%); this has been corrected to 36 women and 13.1% using the verified parliamentary series. Nigeria's historical figures have been cross-checked against IPU Parline. The 2024 Ghana reform is treated as a legal development and not as evidence of an already achieved 30% parliamentary representation.

Comparative Analysis Procedure

The comparative analysis uses four common criteria: level and trend of women's parliamentary representation; legal status and enforceability of gender-equality measures; institutional support and monitoring capacity; and continuing socio-cultural and party-system barriers. The countries are compared first on descriptive indicators and then analytically by asking why apparently similar democratization processes have produced different institutional outcomes. This two-stage procedure prevents the comparison from treating higher representation as proof of policy success and enables the analysis to distinguish between formal rules, implementation capacity and substantive political inclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in Liberal Feminist Theory and Political Representation Theory. Liberal Feminist Theory holds that women should enjoy equal rights, opportunities and access to public institutions and that discriminatory institutional arrangements should be removed through legal and policy reform (Tong, 2018). It therefore directs attention to whether constitutional guarantees, affirmative-action measures, party rules and electoral institutions provide women with genuinely equal opportunities to compete for political office.

Political Representation Theory, particularly Pitkin's (1967) distinction between formal, descriptive and substantive representation, complements the liberal feminist perspective. Descriptive representation concerns the presence of women among political office-holders, whereas substantive representation concerns whether institutions and representatives advance the interests of women. Phillips (1995) further argues for the politics of presence, emphasizing that the composition of representative institutions matters because historically excluded groups require meaningful access to decision-making. The two theories are integrated into the analysis rather than treated as a separate literature review: Liberal Feminism is used to assess equality of access and institutional barriers, while Political Representation Theory is used to evaluate whether increased numerical presence translates into meaningful participation and influence.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON DEMOCRATIZATION, GENDER EQUALITY, AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA AND GHANA

Democratization has been encouraged in Africa since the 1990s as a means of achieving inclusive governance and development and has focused on women's empowerment and gender equality (Agyeman, 2011; Tripp, Casimiro, Kwesiga, & Mungwa, 2009). In both Nigeria and Ghana however, the goal of gender equality in democratic governance is partially realized (Makama, 2013; Ayuba, 2025). Gender equality necessitates changing power dynamics between men and women and representation, accountability, inclusiveness and non-discrimination in democratic institutions (Achieving gender equality – Transforming power relations between women and men and ensuring representation, accountability, inclusiveness and non-discrimination in democratic institutions - Ayuba, 2025; UNDP, 2017).

Democratization in Nigeria has not brought substantial change in the political participation of women. Omotola (2012) contends that the Fourth Republic (1999–2007) did not yield any appreciable gains in the representation of women in Parliament or their involvement in policy making, particularly without affirmative action measures. Despite the stipulation of the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women for having 35% minimum representation of women in governance, Nigeria has included this in its National Gender Policy, women's representation in elected and appointed offices is still low (Adedayo, Adabembe, & Belo, 2022). There is still a male dominated political leadership, which restricts women's participation in decision making processes. Likewise, Ette and Akpan-Obong (2023) point to the barriers women face in the field of politics, such as patriarchal structures and institutional constraints that limit their political agency and ability to occupy marginal positions within the party system.

Ghana has a relatively low rate of women's representation in parliament, which stands around 13-14% (Kyerewaah Asante & Effeh-Attom, 2022) and their political rights are formally recognized in the Constitution, 1992. Ghana has created bodies like the Parliamentary Select Committee on Gender, but hasn't had an in-depth affirmative action law for a long time. In the past, the Representation of the People (Women Members) Act of 1960 has created a temporary boost in the representation of women, and the 31st December Women Movement during the PNDC years further bolstered women's mobilization and institutional support. More recently however, Ghana's Parliament adopted the Affirmative Action Gender Equality Bill in July 2024 to secure representation of at least 30% women in governance by 2030 (Reuters, 2024).

While Africa has made strides towards greater democratization, gender imbalance in political participation is a significant issue in Nigeria and Ghana. Both nations have made strides towards democracy and international gender equality pledges, but women remain under-represented in political leadership and decision-making.

Women's participation in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria has been minimal with less than 5% women being elected into the National Assembly, despite the 35% affirmative action policy (Popoola, Egharevba & Fayomi, 2021). There are patriarchal norms which continue to obstruct women's participation, political violence, and the political 'monetization' that are still affecting women's participation. Also, in Ghana, women occupy approximately 14% of the parliamentary seats, even though there have been some reforms in place, like the Representation of the People (Women Members) Act of 1960 and the Affirmative Action Gender Equality Bill of 2024 (Sossou, 2011). Structural and cultural barriers still limit women's access to leadership positions.

The challenges expose that in both countries, democratization has not necessarily led to gender-inclusive governance. Thus, it is important to explore the interaction between democratization and gender in Nigeria and Ghana, and why current institutional reform has not been successful in ensuring gender parity in political representation.

Although Nigeria and Ghana have adopted democratic reforms and have constitutional provisions for the inclusion of women in governance, the countries have weak institutional enforcement, patriarchal norms, electoral violence and socio-economic inequalities that hinder women's meaningful participation in governance (Diamond, 2019; Gyimah-Boadi, 2021; Popoola et al., 2021; Chukwuemeka & Eze, 2011; Sossou, 2011). Gender equality and women's empowerment is regarded as a multi-dimensional process that encompasses the same opportunities of political, economic, social, and legal participation, however, studies have consistently shown that there are structural barriers that hinder women from involving in political institutions in Nigeria and Ghana, most of which include male dominated party system, lack of access to finance, cultural stereotypes, weak implementation of affirmative action policy, and institutionalized patriarchy (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Ette, 2023). Comparative literature also indicates that Ghana has, in some respects, consolidated more successfully in the democratic sense and is more credible in the electoral process than Nigeria, with reforms such as the Affirmative Action Gender Bill intended to improve Ghana's representation of women, while Nigeria continues to grapple with voter turnout, institutional fragility, and ongoing gender exclusion (Reuters, 2024; Babatunde, 2023; Idike et al., 2020). The reviewed empirical and theoretical studies, therefore, suggest that while women's empowerment is a desired outcome of democracy, it will not be achieved by democracy alone, but rather by effective institutional reforms, inclusive political representation, legal enforcement, socio-economic empowerment, and dismantling the entrenched patriarchal structures within a framework of liberal feminist theory and theory of political representation (Liberal Feminist Theory; Theory of Political Representation) (Tong, 2018; Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995; Tripp, 2015).

DEMOCRATIZATION AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Democratization in Nigeria and Ghana has created regular electoral competition and constitutional opportunities for political participation, but the evidence shows that democratic opening has not automatically produced gender-equal representation. From the perspective of Liberal Feminist Theory, the central issue is whether formal political rights are accompanied by institutions that remove practical barriers to equal participation. Political Representation Theory adds a second question: whether the women who gain access to Parliament achieve a sufficient presence to influence agenda-setting and policy.

Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

Ghana's Fourth Republic records a gradual long-term increase in women's parliamentary representation, although progress has been uneven. The verified period series below records 16 women in 1993–1997, rising to 40 in 2021–2025 as shown in **Table 1**. The 2009–2013 decline demonstrates that democratization alone cannot guarantee continuous progress. The 2017–2021 figure is corrected from the erroneous '3' reported in the original manuscript to 36 women (13.1%). The 2021–2025 figure is 40 women (14.5%). These figures are consistent with the Ghana National Human Development Report and are broadly consistent with IPU historical data, while the IPU reports 40 women in the 276-member parliament following the 2024 election cycle (IPU, 2026; Ghana Statistical Service, 2025).

Table 1: Women's Representation in Ghanaian Parliament (1993–2025)

Parliamentary period	Total seats	Women	Women (%)
1993–1997	200	16	8.00%
1997–2001	200	18	9.00%
2001–2005	200	19	9.50%
2005–2009	230	25	10.90%
2009–2013	230	15	6.50%
201–2017	275	30	10.90%
2017–2021	275	36	13.10%
2021–2025	275	40	14.50%

Source: Ghana Statistical Service (2025), cross-checked with IPU Parline historical data (IPU, 2026). Percentages are calculated from women divided by total seats.

The Ghana pattern illustrates the difference between formal and substantive representation. Liberal Feminist Theory would interpret the upward trend as evidence that institutional opportunities have expanded, but the persistence of a large gender gap shows that formal equality has not removed the structural conditions that shape candidacy and electoral success. Political Representation Theory similarly suggests that the increase in descriptive representation is important but remains insufficient for substantive equality.

Women's Parliamentary Representation in Nigeria

As shown in **Table 2,** Nigeria records a substantially lower and more volatile level of women's parliamentary representation. IPU Parline reports 12 women in the House of Representatives at the beginning of the Fourth Republic, 25 in 2007, 20 in 2015, 12 in 2019 and 14 following the 2023 election; the current IPU update records 15 women in the 356-member House (4.2%). In the Senate, women numbered 3 in 1999, 8 in 2007, 7 in 2015, 8 in 2019 and 4 in 2025 (3.7%). These figures show that Nigeria's policy commitment to a 35% target has not translated into a sustained increase in descriptive representation (IPU, 2026).

Table 2: Women's Representation in Nigerian National Assembly (1999–2023)

Legislative period/update	House seats	Women	Women (%)	Senate seats	Women	Women (%)
1999–2003	351	12	3.40%	109	3	2.80%
2003–2007	360	24	6.70%	107	3	2.80%
2007–2011	358	25	7.00%	109	8	7.30%
2011–2015	352	13	3.70%	109	4	3.70%
2015–2019	360	20	5.60%	108	7	6.50%
2019–2023	350–355	12	3.40%	107–109	8	6.5–7.3%
2023–2025	356	15	4.20%	107	4	3.70%

Source: IPU Parline (2026). Chamber membership varies slightly during a legislative term because of vacancies and changes in membership; therefore the IPU-reported update date is retained rather than treating all figures as fixed election-day totals.

From a Liberal Feminist perspective, Nigeria demonstrates a gap between formal non-discrimination and equal political opportunity. The National Gender Policy's 35% target is not equivalent to a binding electoral quota, and the absence of a compulsory mechanism reduces the capacity of the policy to alter party nomination and electoral outcomes. Political Representation Theory further explains why the low numbers matter: when women remain a small minority, the institutional conditions for collective voice and substantive representation are weaker.

Institutional and Legal Reform: Nigeria and Ghana

Table 3: Nigeria – Gender Equality Frameworks

Dimension	Nigeria	Ghana
Constitutional equality	1999 Constitution prohibits discrimination; political equality is formally recognized.	1992 Constitution protects equality and political rights.
Gender policy/quota	National Gender Policy: 35% affirmative-action target; implementation remains weak.	Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act, 2024 (Act 1121): binding legal framework with progressive representation targets.
CEDAW	Ratified but not domesticated into a comprehensive domestic gender-equality statute.	Integrated into national gender-policy commitments and supported by domestic legal reform.
Monitoring/institutional support	Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and civil-society advocacy; enforcement capacity is limited.	Gender institutions, parliamentary gender structures and statutory implementation mechanisms provide stronger formal support.
Party gatekeeping	Candidate nomination and campaign finance remain major barriers.	Party gatekeeping and single-member constituency competition remain barriers, but reform has increasingly targeted institutional inclusion.

Source: Authors' synthesis from the manuscript literature, IPU Parline, and Ghana's Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection. Ghana's Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act, 2024 was passed in July 2024 and assented to in September 2024; it establishes progressive targets beginning with at least 30% female representation in specified decision-making structures (MoGCSP, 2025).

As presented in **Table 3**, Nigeria and Ghana has adopted several legal and policy frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality, implementation remains weak, thereby limiting their effectiveness in improving women's political participation.

Comparative Interpretation through the Theoretical Framework

The comparison indicates that Ghana's relative advantage is not simply a product of democratization. Rather, it reflects a stronger movement from aspirational policy toward enforceable institutional rules. Liberal Feminist Theory predicts that legal rules are more likely to reduce gender inequality when equality commitments are backed by enforceable obligations, monitoring and sanctions. Ghana's 2024 Act therefore represents a qualitatively different reform instrument from Nigeria's largely policy-based 35% target. Political Representation Theory, however, cautions against interpreting the new Act as an achieved outcome: the current parliamentary share remains about 14.5%, so the law should be evaluated by its implementation trajectory and eventual effect on descriptive and substantive representation.

DISCUSSION

The central finding is that democratization has widened the formal arena of political participation in both Nigeria and Ghana without eliminating gendered inequalities in access to political power. The comparative evidence therefore supports the theoretical distinction between formal equality and effective representation. Women possess constitutional rights to participate, but the conversion of those rights into parliamentary seats is mediated by party nomination systems, campaign finance, political violence, socio-cultural expectations and the enforceability of gender reforms.

Why Ghana Has Performed Relatively Better

Ghana's higher level of parliamentary representation should not be attributed to a single reform. The historical

data show gradual gains interrupted by reversals, particularly the decline around 2009–2013. This demonstrates that institutional reform is neither automatic nor linear. The more important difference is the accumulation of institutional mechanisms: constitutional equality, parliamentary gender structures, sustained civil-society mobilization and, most recently, a statutory affirmative-action framework. Ghana's Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act, 2024 creates a legal obligation rather than merely expressing an administrative aspiration. It mandates progressive targets and provides a stronger basis for monitoring compliance, although its ultimate effectiveness cannot yet be established because implementation is still recent (MoGCSP, 2025).

This institutional development is consistent with Liberal Feminist Theory because the law attempts to correct unequal opportunity through formal institutional intervention. It also corresponds with Political Representation Theory by recognizing that descriptive presence requires deliberate mechanisms when ordinary electoral competition reproduces existing inequalities. The existence of a parliamentary Women's Caucus and gender-focused parliamentary structures further provides channels through which women's presence can potentially translate into substantive representation (IPU, 2026).

Why Nigeria's Reforms Have Produced Weaker Outcomes

Nigeria presents a different institutional configuration. Its National Gender Policy established a 35% affirmative-action target, but a policy target without a binding electoral mechanism places implementation largely within institutions that have limited capacity to compel political parties to alter candidate-selection practices. Consequently, the reform has not sufficiently changed the gatekeeping structures through which candidates secure party nominations. The very low House and Senate figures reported by IPU after the 2023 election demonstrate the persistence of this implementation gap (IPU, 2026).

From the Liberal Feminist perspective, the Nigerian case shows that formal recognition of equality is inadequate when institutional arrangements continue to distribute political opportunities unequally. From the perspective of Political Representation Theory, the problem is also numerical: a small minority of women has fewer opportunities to develop sustained collective influence within legislative institutions. Thus, the weakness is not simply a shortage of women willing to participate; it is a failure to transform the institutional conditions under which participation is converted into representation.

Why Some Reforms Are More Successful Than Others

The evidence suggests three reasons why reforms differ in effectiveness. First, legal enforceability matters. Ghana's 2024 Act has a statutory basis, progressive targets and institutional obligations, whereas Nigeria's 35% target has historically functioned primarily as a policy commitment. Second, implementation capacity matters. A rule is unlikely to change representation where electoral bodies, ministries and political parties lack resources or incentives to monitor compliance. Third, reform must reach the political party gatekeeping stage. Women may have equal constitutional rights to contest elections, yet remain excluded if parties control nominations through practices shaped by incumbency, patronage, campaign costs and male-dominated networks.

The comparison also shows why cultural explanations alone are insufficient. Patriarchal norms operate in both countries, yet similar cultural constraints have produced different institutional outcomes. The decisive analytical question is therefore how institutions mediate those norms. Ghana's recent reform attempts to constrain the effect of structural discrimination through enforceable rules, while Nigeria's policy framework has been less successful in altering the incentives of parties and political actors. This does not mean Ghana has solved gender inequality; rather, it indicates a stronger institutional pathway for addressing it.

Implications for Descriptive and Substantive Representation

Higher numbers of women in Parliament should be treated as an intermediate outcome rather than the final measure of gender equality. Descriptive representation is important because political institutions become more inclusive when historically excluded groups gain presence. However, substantive representation requires evidence that women parliamentarians influence legislation, oversight, budgeting and policy agendas affecting

gender equality. The present study establishes differences in descriptive representation and institutional design; it does not claim to have measured the substantive policy influence of individual women legislators. Future research should therefore examine committee leadership, bill sponsorship, gender-responsive budgeting and legislative outcomes.

In general, the Nigeria–Ghana comparison demonstrates that democratization provides the political space within which gender reforms can operate, but it does not determine the outcome by itself. Institutional design, enforceability, party incentives, implementation capacity and socio-cultural transformation jointly determine whether democratic inclusion becomes meaningful gender equality.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study establishes that democratization has expanded formal opportunities for political participation in Nigeria and Ghana, but it has not produced gender equality in parliamentary representation. Verified parliamentary data show that Ghana has maintained a higher level of women's representation than Nigeria, while Nigeria's representation remains particularly low in both chambers. The comparison indicates that the difference is associated less with democratization itself than with the enforceability, institutional support and implementation of gender reforms. Ghana's 2024 Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act represents a stronger legal mechanism than Nigeria's policy-based quota, although its long-term effectiveness remains to be established. In theoretical terms, Liberal Feminist Theory explains the importance of removing institutional barriers to equal political opportunity, while Political Representation Theory demonstrates why descriptive presence must be strengthened before substantive representation can be meaningfully assessed.

Recommendations

i. Gender policies should be mandatory and not advisory, and there should be penalties for failure to comply.
ii. Nigeria needs to move beyond policy based quota to binding legislation like that of Ghana (2024 Act).
iii. Internal quotas and transparent nomination procedure for women should be adopted by Parties. Increase access to women for funds for campaigns, credit schemes and leadership.
iv. Build civic education to challenge patriarchal norms inhibiting women's political participation. Encourage women to pursue leadership development, digital inclusion and political mentorship.
v. Electoral bodies and gender ministries need to be well resourced and empowered to monitor compliance.

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