

**INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT IN NIGERIAN GOVERNANCE:
ASSESSING POLICY FRAMEWORKS AND THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA,
1999–2023**

Chigozie V. Amadi & Prof. P.A Gobo

Luvxtopher@gmail.com

**Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Faculty of Humanities
University of port Harcourt**

Abstract

Despite implementing gender policies, two National Action Plans on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and a constitutional promise for equality, women still only make up a tiny percentage of elected office holders and senior diplomats and peace process actors in Nigeria. This article looks at some of the obstacles that have slowed the progress of women in Nigerian governance from 1999 to 2023 and the state of governance policy and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in addressing these obstacles. It is based on narrative experiences of twelve women in diplomatic, legislative, community and civil-society roles. Four main categories of barriers become evident: institutional practices and structure, cultural and patriarchal norms, economic and resource limitations and security threats. Two secondary barriers, the double burden of domestic and professional responsibility as well as credibility discount for women's contributions, are found at all levels. The article demonstrates that these barriers are not stand-alone, and that the narratives of the participants highlight gaps in the policy frameworks, such as the lack of norms and mechanisms to protect women in local offices and mediation, as well as the lack of funding mechanisms for women-led peacebuilding, and the invisibility of the informal mediation labour. It asserts that the issues that Nigeria is grappling with is not the lack of the gender policy, but the implementation, enforcement and resourcing of the policy as well as targeted reforms.

Keywords: Women in Governance; Institutional Barriers; Gender Policy; Women, Peace and Security; UNSCR 1325; Nigeria; Patriarchy.

Introduction

Nigeria has had several pledges for gender equality throughout the years of its transition to civilian rule in 1999. The National Gender Policy of 2006 mandated for 35 per cent women's representation in political positions, while the country has had a first National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 since 2013 and a second in 2017 (PeaceWomen, n.d.). All these pledges have been made but women's presence in formal power has remained low. Following the 2023 elections, the National Assembly had three out of 109 Senate seats, 17 out of 360 House of Representatives seats, approximately 4.2 per cent of seats, and none of the 15 State House of Assembly seats was won by a woman (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre [PLAC], 2023). In March 2022, the National Assembly rejected five constitutional amendments to bolster women's representation, among them was the amendment to establish a quota for women (PLAC, 2022). This pattern also leaves a gap in the policy documents, namely, why and how are women not moving forward when the pledges are there? Although structural and cultural barriers to women's political participation in Nigeria have been documented in existing scholarship, these studies have heavily depended on data on aggregate representation, and on general descriptions of patriarchy. There is less understanding of the lived and experienced experiences, and how barriers are navigated, by women who have or have not served in positions of office, serve in the foreign service, or serve as community mediators.

The following article poses three questions. What are some of the most important barriers women in Nigeria judge are present in governance and peacebuilding? What are the interactions between those barriers? Their accounts suggest what about Nigeria's gender policy frameworks and WPS agenda are adequate? The article then moves through a literature review and framework, a statement of method, analysis of the findings by type of barrier, assessment of the policy frameworks in relation to the findings, and a conclusion and recommendation.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Gendered institutions and barriers to advancement

The feminist institutionalist scholarship approach views institutions as gendered and not neutral. Acker (1992) suggested that the ideal worker and legitimate authority approaches are embedded in organizations, which disadvantage women, and Mackay, Kenny and Chappell (2010) expanded this into a research programme which investigates both formal rules and informal norms. Even when there is no rule, gendered understandings of legitimate authority is repeated as demonstrated by Chappell and Waylen 2013. In Nigeria, this means that obstacles can be encountered simultaneously at multiple levels: at the level of codified rules, at the level of organizational culture, at the level of resources required to compete and at the level of interactions in meetings and deliberation processes (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016).

This conceptual framework identifies four main types of barriers (institutional and structural, cultural and patriarchal, economic and resource-related, and security-related) and two secondary barriers (the double burden and the credibility discount). They can be analytically distinguished but as the results demonstrate, they are empirically interconnected.

Policy frameworks and the WPS agenda in Nigeria

In 2013, Nigeria's first National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 was introduced and the second in 2017 (PeaceWomen, n.d.). The first plan was found to have a poor stakeholder coordination, weak inter-agency cooperation, initial lack of consideration of violent extremism and limited domestication by the state governments while the second plan was created to rectify these. (Adefisoye & Adefisoye, 2019) The second plan has however been criticized for not having a budget (PeaceWomen, n.d.). The process of domestication has not been uniform: only states with state-level plans have done so. In addition to the WPS agenda, the National Gender Policy of 2006 established the 35 per cent target which has not been achieved and the Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill was not passed. A policy environment study reveals that that is not achieved and that gender mainstreaming in the electoral processes is still largely symbolic (The Conversation, 2023). This context is important because it provides evidence of the gap between policy and practice in the real world as it is experienced by those who are impacted by it.

Methodology

A qualitative study method is employed with 12 women purposively selected to include variations in institutional tier, sector and level of government. The participants are career and former diplomats, a local legislative leader, ward-level and community mediators, public servants in the women's affairs and justice portfolios and civil-society leaders. The interviews were conducted during February to September 2026 and the respondents were asked for the description of their roles, challenges they had encountered and strategies applied. Responses were thematically analysed and barriers were coded based on the mechanism outlined. Quotations are reported as spoken and interview material is quoted as "personal communication" with the date of the interview.

The results are not statistically generalisable due to the small sample size and to the fact that the sample is purposive. They are designed to explain the working of barriers and to assess their fit to

policy frameworks based on lived experience. Another drawback is that individuals report how serious a barrier is, an issue addressed below.

Findings and Discussion

The categories of barriers identified, the number of participants reporting each and an example of each barrier, are summarised in Table 1. Cultural barriers were found in all categories, near-universal institutional barriers were found, and across all levels reported economic barriers, with security threats present only among women in local office, mediation and community-level civil society. Each of these categories is explored in turn, in the sections below, with the participants' own words focusing on the ways barriers work and the ways they reinforce each other. Also noted are places where participants mentioned that the barriers were "not a problem" or "not a very big problem" since this indicates how some constraints became normal over a career, and how the self-perception of how severe the barrier was may have underestimated the extent of the constraint.

Table 1

Principal and Secondary Barriers Reported by Participants

Barrier category	Reported by	Illustrative manifestation
Institutional and structural	11 of 12	Spousal-permission rules; informal gatekeeping; contested authority
Cultural and patriarchal	12 of 12	Compensatory legitimacy; marital restriction; religious identity
Economic and resource	9 of 12	No female patronage networks; self-funded mediation; funder bias
Security threats	Four participants	Death threats; occult intimidation; obstruction; no protection
Double burden	Obineme; Gwari	Domestic and professional demands combined
Credibility discount	Gwari; Osakwe	Ideas ignored until repeated by men; erasure from records

Institutional and structural barriers

After cultural norms, the most commonly reported barrier was institutional and structural barriers, in 11 of the 12 transcripts. Ambassador Hadiza Mustapha's description of the historic directive that married female officers must seek and receive permission to go overseas, and the single-rate allowance for women who were married but didn't take their husbands to their overseas post, is illustrative of barriers that, for much of Mustapha's career, were made explicit, if not merely informal (Mustapha, personal communication, June 5, 2026). Bisi Hammed observes a more up-to-date pattern: "Certain governmental structures favored the representation of males making it difficult to seek to have equal women representation" and she sees "little initiatives aimed at elevating women's voice in diplomatic or governance processes" (personal communication, June 2, 2026).

In the legislature, Chochi Nwankwo explains that people fought her position as the first female leader of the house even though she was the first woman to lead the house. At a systemic level, Bridget Osakwe says "hitherto leadership was an exclusive reserve for the men; as a woman coming to aspire to it was seen as an aberration" (personal communication, September 5, 2026). The accounts below support the claim that institutions are spaces where gender norms of legitimate authority are reproduced in practice (Chappell & Waylen, 2013).

Occupational segregation in other jobs related to security is another barrier. One reason for not recruiting women to some of the more difficult or specialized positions in the MFAs is that it is believed that women are not suited to such departments because they are "tasking" (Yetunde, personal communication, May 22, 2026). Mustapha describes the pattern in institutional terms, that women are known to be more prudent, transparent and accountable, while men are uncomfortable to have women in leadership positions; where they would take decisions on financial matters, for as simple a reason as the fact that they find it difficult to ask women for money" (personal communication, June 5, 2026). The testimony renders the usual architecture of financially and security-governance dominated by men into a personal, first-person narrative of its enactment interpersonally.

Cultural and patriarchal norms

All the participants raised cultural and patriarchal norms. The direct articulation comes from Elizabeth Ovie, who claims that "your gender as a woman (already) is a barrier; they look at women as people who cannot offer much", and that "assumptions persist until when you are able to calm to look at the motherly perspective of a woman; and [realise] that although she might not be in a political position to talk to them there in an innate gift in her to solve whatever matters" (Ovie, personal communication, August 16, 2026). This shows the culture's deference to women's power to mediate, which this study calls compensatory legitimacy – women's authority is legitimated in the culture only when they are presented as maternal, not political.

However, the most elaborated account is given by Osakwe, who traces patriarchal exclusion to "from the family setting that as a woman you are supposed to stay at home and be a good wife," that is, to leadership aspiration, which may elicit "pushbacks" even from men who are personally supportive of women to lead (Osakwe, personal communication, September 5, 2026). Nwankwo takes this analysis one step further by proposing a theory of change: "the full acceptance of integration will go a long way — with the policy alone does not mean implementation, because you can't work with what you do not accept" (Nwankwo, personal communication, May 14, 2026). The formulation she sets out in her research anticipates the argument presented in section 5: policy commitments without cultural acceptance do not result in practice.

Ovie also describes a house mechanism. "So many passionate women in our society today... have been denied first at home, especially the married ones, because, in the name of marriage, their husbands wouldn't allow them to be in a leadership position at all which can lead to divorce or separation", she explains (Ovie, personal communication, August 16, 2026). This brings a home or domestic aspect to the institutional and public sphere constraints commonly discussed in the literature (Adamu & Para-Mallam, 2012). This can be exacerbated by religious identification. When asked about sensitive questions related to border security, being a woman and not a Muslim (plus I don't cover my hair), Yetunde says people are not willing to share information that they consider "sensitive." The testimony brings together, to a large degree, a domestic literature on gender and religion and introduces it to a cross-border diplomatic context.

Economic and resource constraints

All 12 participants at all levels raised resource and economic constraints. Osakwe mentions a particular lack of an institution: "We don't have women mentors, women with economic importance who can empower other women like we have godfathers with their big purses to empower their protégés in the political arena" (personal communication, September 5, 2026). This is a point to extend the general observation that Nigerian electoral politics is resource intensive and unpolished for women (British Council, 2012) and the fact that there is no alternative to the male patronage network. From the legislative perspective Nwankwo confirms that she had to sponsor some programs and that some of the things she would have done a male counterpart would have done

were hers to do "extra of" in order to be "among (with)" her peers (Nwankwo, personal communication, May 14, 2026).

At the community mediation level, constraint is a hindrance to delivery. Mary Ufoma explains that mediators risk being given gifts by the parties to their cases but when they are not received or delayed, "we get funded sometimes by the local government or even tax ourselves personally to be able to carry out some movements. But where these funds don't come or is delayed we are not able to deliver as and when due" (Ufoma, personal communication, July 18, 2026). Emem Okon notes that the organization managed to do 4 projects over the number of years that it operated in Rivers State, while other organizations managed to do 20-25 projects, attributing the difference to funder bias, which she believes is gendered: "we were also struggling with funder, we are women, the other organizations were able to do 20, 25 projects" (Okon, personal communication, September 5, 2026). This is direct evidence for the claim that women's peace organisations are less well-resourced than men's peace organisations, in line with evidence that indicates that less than two per cent of international assistance to fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAST) is allocated to gender-responsive peacebuilding (OECD, 2021).

Security threats

The threat from security problems was the biggest challenge in some accounts, and was prevalent in both the community and legislative accounts as well as several diplomatic accounts, but not in the two diplomatic accounts, where the biggest concerns were institutional access. According to Nwankwo, the most dire scenarios involve "death threats most of the time I wouldn't sleep in the house, will park my car and leave home and kids for days" and "meetings are called at the dead of the night that was too risky to attend". The challenge of late night meetings, occult intimidation because it 'goes against one's faith' and even threat to life is cited by Patience Sangha as problems in mediation for chieftains (personal communication, 16 August, 2026). Institutional obstruction is extended to include cultism, militancy entering into the communities and insecurity (Osakwe personal communication, September 5, 2026).

These accounts provide localized evidence that corroborates the patterns reported in the aggregated form (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021) mainly on violence against women in politics. They also demonstrate that the risk is not limited to the conflict-hit North-East and Middle Belt (as is highlighted in much of the literature) but can also be found across the Niger Delta and South-South local government areas that several of the participants were sourced from.

Of the three who reported the highest threats none reported having any institutional safeguards, including escort to safety, a secure transport, or a formal threat-reporting process. Where protection did happen, it was self organised – Nwankwo's practice of moving her car and staying away from home was an improvisation on her own as opposed to an institutional accommodation. This reinforces the results of the study that indicates that women peacebuilders and local politicians with lower levels of influence than the prominent men are less likely to have access to protection measures (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021). The security barrier is thus exacerbated by the institutional barrier: Institutions that don't acknowledge women's mediation and legislative work don't extend that to women's work.

A culturally-based variant has been reported by Ufoma, where days of restricted movement, on threat of spiritual sanction, are established by traditional calendars when days are required for date of reconciliation or peace settlement: "So when we have to book date for reconciliation or peace settlement we need to be sure it does not coincide with the communities cultural practices" (Ufoma, personal communication, July 18, 2026). Even though it does not pose a direct threat, this constraint does share attributes with the other two categories, cultural and security, and demonstrates the empirical interrelationship between the four categories.

Secondary barriers: the double burden and the credibility discount

There are two secondary barriers, one across tiers. The double burden is characterized by the expectation that women should carry out their roles in the home and at the same time hold up to high expectations in the professional realm, reports Loveth Obineme (personal communication, 15 February 2026). In addition to being emotionally and physically demanding, diplomatic and peacebuilding efforts can be particularly challenging when operating in a conflict zone, says Anthonia Gwari (personal communication, April 12, 2026). The accounts corroborate the view of the Nigerian political career paths as a continuous trajectory that is structurally unfeasible with home responsibilities that are mostly skewed towards women (Ushe, 2018), such responsibilities are reported on all tiers.

The credibility discount—whereby until a man confirms a woman's suggestion with her own word, until a man echoes a woman's suggestion, or words similar to it, but with a slight variation, until a man says something that is very close to a woman's suggestion, but not identical, until there is a man's suggestion, similar—but not exactly—the same, and then everybody says, 'Yes, that's a good point'—brings an idea to a clear light in Gwari's experience, where she has noticed that women are repeatedly lectured on. This is a description of the phenomenon from a mechanism perspective and illustrates that the barrier is present during meetings and not just at the entrance. While it's true that Osakwe works on the historical record. However, women who succeeded, after a long period, in settling a dispute among the chieftains of their respective communities through consistent shuttle diplomacy between two chieftains were not recognized "even in the books," and it was only a later researcher at the university that "brought to life the role women played" (Osakwe, personal communication, September 5, 2026). Women's contributions can thus be lost from the institutional memory even if they are successful.

Another trend seen is an increase in attention brought to women-led organisations. Okon says that she has been told by officials and funders that they believe it is based on sexism and not that her organization has a poor track record. The amount of resources is not only a concern, but also the level of proof of competence that needs to be demonstrated by a women's organisation to receive resources, based on the findings of increased donor scrutiny of women's civil-society organisations (Fritz, Doering, & Gumru, 2011).

Absences and naturalised barriers

The informative feature of participants' absences is also evident. When asked directly what the barriers are, yetunde referred to access to information across cultures instead of to exclusion within the MoFA, indicating that not all groups of diplomats now have barriers external to the ministry as they do internally. When asked about her career, Mustapha described it as "mostly without insurmountable challenges" and mentioned practices, spousal permission and differential allowances – which this study defines as significant structural barriers – which she has faced. The gap is the finding itself: Barriers can be naturalised to the point of being described in a less harsh manner by those who have crossed them, than they would be described through structural analysis. It has a methodological implication because patients' experience of severity is less than the structural constraint and a substantive implication because reforms should be measured by whether successful women experience difficulty.

Interaction of barriers

The barriers present a complex mix of codified and informal institutional practice, culturally naturalised notions of authority, gendered resource scarcity and, in some cases, attacks on safety for the group of participants that shared this view. These categories interact. Nwankwo's threats of death are not isolated from the lack of a protective structure in local offices for women. Okon's funder scepticism is not really distinct from the cultural bias put forth by Ovie and Osakwe, that

women have no "money or power" necessary for authentic power. So a single targeting of one category is likely to fail to achieve any success.

Assessing Policy Frameworks and the WPS Agenda

In contrast to these results, Nigeria's framework has a consistent set of findings: statements of commitments are at the level of participation and representation, while barriers mentioned by participants are at the level of implementation, resources, protection and recognition. There are four gaps which stand out.

The first is the resourcing. Nothing is allocated as a budget for the second National Action Plan (PeaceWomen, n.d.) and community mediators report exactly these consequences: funding their own travel, while four projects were finished by a women-led organisation, twenty by community mediators. Women bear the responsibility for delivery of participation pillars without funding avenues. The second area is protection. Despite the fact that some of the participants received death threats, no evidence has been found in participants' accounts of protective measures for women in local office or mediation, resulting from the WPS agenda. A peace plan that includes women participants and allows participants to create their own own security measures is only a first step in addressing women's conditions of survival.

The third one is recognition. The term "participation" understates the roles of participants, and the non-institutional nature of informal mediation means there is no record of the process. A lack of recording precludes women's peacebuilding labour being a proof point for change or reform (Acker, 1992). There are four gaps, one of which is enforcement and acceptance. There was a lack of meeting the 35 per cent target set by the National Gender Policy and also, five gender bills were rejected in March 2022 (PLAC, 2022) while the proportion of women in the National Assembly after 2023 was close to 4 per cent (PLAC, 2023). The quote, "policy alone doesn't mean implementation," is very aptly said by Nwankwo. Evidence from previous evaluations, which point to socio-cultural issues, lack of coordination and insufficient domestication of the UNSCR by the States (Adefisoye & Adefisoye, 2019), indicate the same.

The WPS agenda also reaches a structural ceiling, as far as formal peace processes are concerned. While the plans stress participation and representation, there are indications that the participation goals are being achieved to a large degree at the community and civil-society level, as formal peace processes continue to be Track I spaces "where you find presidents most times women are not involved", as Osakwe notes. Mustapha's career indicates that women can make it to the highest diplomatic ranks; Yetunde's evidence of informal barriers to security sensitive posts indicates that there is still a narrow path to these positions. Any attempt to enhance Track II and Track III activity, but not the Track I, without creating Track I positions has potential to create an even more traditional division of labour in which women are responsible for mediation and men are responsible for agreement closure. The experience in Nigeria has therefore demonstrated that while it is important to include many people in consultations, it is vital to include those who make decisions and that it is important to monitor the results of WPS, rather than just the number of people who are at the consultations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has demonstrated how four interacting categories of barriers, institutional, cultural, economic and security related, in addition to the double burden and credibility discount, have limited the progress of women in the governance of Nigeria from 1999 to 2023. While participation is now a goal of policy frameworks, such as the WPS agenda, they have not provided funding, protection, recognition or enforcement that accounts of participation indicate is needed. Nigeria's problem is not really that there is no gender related policy, but rather that its policy is not implemented. These

conclusions are limited by this study's small purposive sample size and self-reported degree of barrier, but are not changed by the limitations.

Based on the foregoing the following recommendations are made:

First, the next National Action Plan must include a dedicated budget, and clear funding mechanism for Women-led peacebuilding organisations and community mediators. Second, there is a need for protection systems and confidential threat reporting mechanisms to be put in place at the local, state and federal levels for women in local elective office and mediation.

Third, public service job classification and public service reporting systems should include informal mediation and early warning activities and recognize and document it as a contribution to the public service.

Fourth, eliminate all informal gatekeeping within the foreign service for assignments and promotion in areas of security sensitive and financial portfolios, and report on foreign service assignments according to gender.

Lastly, there is need for the legislature to have a relook at temporary special measures and Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill in tandem with continued efforts on cultural acceptance, considering Nigeria's experience which indicates that changes in the law without social acceptance is not reflected in practice. Future research should test these propositions with larger and mixed-gender samples and should measure whether protective and funding reforms change women's persistence in public roles.

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