

# The Role of the Media in Quotas, Affirmative Action, and Women's Leadership Representation: Examining Special Seats for Women's Political Inclusion in Nigeria

<sup>1</sup>Ojumiri, E. E and <sup>2</sup>Imhanobe, H. J. PhD

<sup>1</sup>Department of Mass Communication, Ebelle Jonathan College of Arts and Social Sciences  
University: Igbinedion University Okada, Edo State, Nigeria

Email: [ojumiri.emmanuel@iuokada.edu.ng](mailto:ojumiri.emmanuel@iuokada.edu.ng)

<sup>2</sup>Department of Mass Communication, Ebelle Jonathan College of Arts and Social Sciences  
University: Igbinedion University Okada, Edo State, Nigeria

Email: [imhanobe.habsat@iuokada.edu.ng](mailto:imhanobe.habsat@iuokada.edu.ng)

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## Abstract

Women's political representation in Nigeria remains among the lowest globally despite constitutional guarantees, international commitments, and affirmative action targets such as the 35% threshold articulated in the National Gender Policy. Women currently occupy a significantly small proportion of elective and appointive positions in the country, reflecting deep-seated structural, cultural, and institutional barriers to gender equality in politics (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023; UN Women, 2022). This article examines the critical role of the media in shaping public discourse, influencing policy debates on gender quotas and special legislative seats for women, and either reinforcing or challenging systemic gender biases. Media institutions serve as powerful agenda-setting platforms capable of shaping political narratives and influencing citizens' perceptions of gender and leadership (Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shaw, 1972). Through a combination of literature synthesis, policy analysis, and a media studies framework, the paper argues that media narratives significantly affect both public perceptions and political will toward affirmative action and reserved seats for women in Nigeria (Pippa Norris, 1997; Karen Ross, 2017). The article further highlights the emerging media-led advocacy supporting the Special Seats Bill aimed at increasing women's representation in Nigeria's legislative bodies and proposes recommendations to strengthen media contributions to gender-inclusive governance (National Assembly of Nigeria, 2023; Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023).

**Keywords:** Affirmative action, Quotas, Bill, Representation, Gender Equality

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Despite women constituting approximately half of Nigeria's population, their representation in elective and appointive political positions remains extremely low. According to recent data, women occupy less than 6 to 7 % of elective and appointive political positions, contrasting sharply with the 35 % affirmative action target set in the National Gender Policy (NGP) and reiterated in legal advocacy campaigns (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2006; IPU, 2023). This persistent disparity places Nigeria among the lowest-ranking countries globally in

terms of gender-balanced political representation (World Economic Forum, 2023).

According to scholars, this under-representation highlights universal barriers structural, cultural, economic, and political that obstruct women's access to leadership roles (Arowolo, 2019; Okeke & Abubakar, 2020). These include gendered socio-cultural perceptions, financial barriers, party nomination practices, and widespread media stereotypes that undermine women's credibility as political actors. The media, as a principal mediator of

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political information, can either challenge or reinforce these barriers (McCombs, 2014).

### Statement of the Problem

Despite Nigeria's constitutional commitment to equality, its endorsement of international gender equality instruments, and the adoption of affirmative action targets such as the 35% benchmark in the National Gender Policy (NGP), women's political representation in the country remains persistently low (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2006; UN Women, 2022). Women continue to occupy less than 6 to 7% of elective and appointive political positions, positioning Nigeria among the poorest performers globally in terms of gender-balanced political leadership (IPU, 2023). This persistent gap highlights a critical disconnect between policy commitments and actual political outcomes.

While structural, cultural, economic, and institutional barriers have been widely acknowledged as limiting women's access to political leadership, insufficient scholarly attention has been given to the role of the media in sustaining or challenging these barriers within the Nigerian context (Arowolo, 2019). Media institutions play a central role in shaping political discourse, framing policy debates, and influencing public opinion (McCombs, 2014). However, prevailing media narratives often marginalise women politicians, reinforce gender stereotypes, and frame affirmative action measures such as gender quotas and special legislative seats as controversial or undesirable. Such representations risk weakening public support and political will for reforms aimed at enhancing women's political inclusion (GMMP, 2020; Gallagher, 2005).

Moreover, although social media has emerged as a powerful platform for advocacy and civic engagement, its influence on public debates surrounding women's representation and the proposed Special Seats Bill has not been sufficiently examined in academic literature (Loader & Mercea, 2011; Castells, 2015). The interaction between traditional media and social media in shaping perceptions, mobilising support, and exerting pressure on policymakers remains underexplored. The absence of a comprehensive analysis of how media framing across both traditional and digital platforms affects public perception, policy debates, and legislative outcomes constitutes a significant research gap. Addressing this gap is critical to understanding the media's role in either perpetuating gender exclusion or advancing affirmative action and inclusive governance in Nigeria. This study therefore seeks to interrogate how media narratives influence the discourse on quotas, affirmative action, and women's leadership representation, with particular attention to the Special Seats Bill as a contemporary policy intervention.

### Research Objectives

1. Examine how Nigerian traditional media frame

women's political representation, gender quotas, and affirmative action policies.

2. Analyze the role of the media in influencing public opinion and political will regarding the Special Seats Bill for women in Nigeria.

3. Assess the extent to which media narratives reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes in political leadership representation.

4. Explore the role of social media platforms in mobilizing support, debate, and advocacy for women's political inclusion in Nigeria.

### Research Questions

1. How do Nigerian media organizations frame issues of women's political representation, gender quotas, and affirmative action?

2. In what ways does media coverage influence public perception and policy debates on the Special Seats Bill in Nigeria?

3. To what extent do media narratives reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes in women's political leadership representation?

4. How have social media users engaged with and responded to discussions on women's representation and the Special Seats Bill in Nigeria?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Women's Political Representation and Affirmative Action

Scholarly literature consistently links women's political under-representation to structural and institutional barriers rather than lack of competence or interest. Krook (2009) argues that "women's exclusion from political institutions is the product of historically gendered systems of candidate selection and political recruitment" (p. 6). In Nigeria, these barriers manifest through patriarchal party structures, monetised politics, and cultural norms that frame leadership as a male preserve (Arowolo, 2019).

Affirmative action measures such as quotas and reserved seats have been globally recognised as effective mechanisms for correcting gender imbalances. Dahlerup (2006) notes that quota systems are "fast-track strategies designed to compensate for structural discrimination rather than provide unearned advantage" (p. 12). Countries that have adopted legislated quotas or reserved seats, particularly in Africa and Latin America, have recorded significant increases in women's parliamentary representation (IPU, 2023). Despite Nigeria's adoption of the 35% affirmative action benchmark in the National

Gender Policy, the absence of enforceable legislation has limited its impact, leaving representation levels critically low, which undermines efforts to achieve gender equality in political representation.

## 2.2 Media Framing, Agenda-Setting, and Gender Politics

The media plays a central role in shaping political reality through agenda-setting and framing processes. According to McCombs (2014), “the media may not tell people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling people what to think about” (p. 1). In the realm of gender and politics, media framing influences the perception of women's leadership as either legitimate, essential, or a challenge to established norms.

Empirical studies reveal that women politicians are often marginalised in news coverage or framed via gendered stereotypes. The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP, 2020) reported that women in politics are more likely to be portrayed in relation to their appearance, emotions, or family roles than their male counterparts. Gallagher (2005) similarly observes that such portrayals “symbolically exclude women from the sphere of serious political authority” (p. 24). In Nigeria, these media patterns reinforce public scepticism toward women's leadership and weaken support for affirmative action initiatives.

## 2.3 Media Narratives and Gender Quotas in Nigeria

Existing Nigerian scholarship has largely focused on cultural and institutional constraints on women's political participation, with limited attention to media dynamics. Okeke and Abubakar (2020) argue that public resistance to gender quotas is often rooted in misinformation and elite framing that presents them as undermining meritocracy. Media narratives that describe affirmative action as “reverse discrimination” or “political favouritism” contribute to this resistance.

Conversely, advocacy-orientated media content has shown potential to shift public opinion. Reports by WIMDI (2022) indicate that sustained media engagement, particularly by women journalists and gender-focused outlets, has helped reframe quotas as democratic inclusion tools rather than privileges. Such framing aligns with Castells' (2015) assertion that media networks can function as “spaces of power where meanings are contested and social change is negotiated” (p. 15).

## 2.4 Social Media, Digital Advocacy, and Women's Political Inclusion

Social media has transformed political communication by lowering barriers to participation and enabling counter-narratives. Loader and Mercea (2011) describe digital platforms as creating “new repertoires of political engagement that blur the boundaries between citizens, activists, and media producers” (p. 760). In Nigeria, platforms such as X (Twitter) and Instagram have

become critical spaces for feminist advocacy and mobilisation around women's representation.

Hashtag activism, including campaigns like #SpecialSeatsBill, illustrates how social media amplifies policy debates and exerts pressure on lawmakers. Castells (2015) notes that online mobilisation gains political relevance when it translates into offline action, a pattern evident in Nigeria, where digital advocacy has supported protests, public hearings, and legislative engagement. However, social media also hosts polarised debates, reflecting broader societal tensions around gender, power, and democratic reform.

## 2.5 Research Gap

While global literature affirms the importance of media framing in shaping attitudes toward gender quotas, there remains limited empirical analysis of how Nigerian traditional and social media interact to influence discourse on women's political representation. In particular, the media's role in shaping public and legislative responses to the Special Seats Bill has not been sufficiently examined. This study addresses this gap by integrating media studies, gender politics, and digital advocacy perspectives to analyse how media narratives affect policy debates and women's leadership representation in Nigeria.

## 3. Theoretical Framework: Media, Quota Systems, and Affirmative Action

Media institutions serve as critical intermediaries in democratic societies by shaping public opinion, framing policy debates, and influencing agenda setting. In the context of gender and politics, media dissertations can:

- Legitimise or contest the need for gender quotas and reserved seats,
- Frame women leaders in stereotypical terms, focusing on personal attributes rather than competencies.
- Elevate public understanding of affirmative action measures and gender equality commitments.

Affirmative action in Nigeria is anchored in the NGP, which recommends a 35% minimum representation of women in governance. However, this target has lacked enforceable legislative backing, limiting its implementation.

Quota systems, whether legislated reserved seats or party-level candidate quotas, are globally recognised targeted strategies to accelerate women's representation. However, in Nigeria, their adoption has been slow and contested. The proposed Special Seats Bill, which seeks to reserve legislative seats for women, faces political resistance and stresses the role of media in shaping narratives that could influence its passage, particularly in highlighting the benefits of increased women's representation and countering negative perceptions about women's leadership capabilities.

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### 4. The Nigerian Media Landscape and Gender Representation

#### 4.1 Media Coverage of Women in Politics

Studies and reports on media representation reveal that women candidates and leaders receive less coverage and are more likely to be portrayed through the lens of personal or stereotypical attributes rather than policy expertise (GMMP, 2020; Gallagher, 2005). This pattern reinforces public perceptions that politics is predominantly a male domain and discourages women's political ambitions (Arowolo, 2019). Gender-biased media narratives include emphasising appearance, emotion, or family roles over professional qualifications, an aspect that both reflects and reinforces broader societal norms.

#### 4.2 Media as Advocate for Quotas and Special Seats

Beyond coverage patterns, segments of the Nigerian media ecosystem, particularly women journalists and civil society media networks, play an active advocacy role. Initiatives such as the *Fit for Inclusion* programmes and coalitions involving the Women in Media Development Initiative (WIMDI) and the Nigerian Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ) have campaigned to amplify discourse on the Special Seats Bill and gender quotas.

These media-led advocacy efforts serve multiple functions:

- Raising public awareness about the rationale and mechanisms of special seats,
- Challenging misrepresentations of women leaders,
- Mobilizing grassroots support and political pressure for affirmative action reforms.

### 5. Case Study: The Special Seats Bill in Nigeria

The Special Seats Bill aims to constitutionally reserve a number of legislative seats exclusively for women at federal and state levels, an institutional affirmative action to correct gender imbalances. Debate around the bill has been shaped by media framing and advocacy (Punch Newspapers, 2023; Okeke & Abubakar, 2020). Supportive media narratives frame the bill as a necessary corrective to entrenched male dominance and a fulfilment of gender equality commitments (Adebayo, 2022; UN Women, 2021). Critics within mainstream media sometimes frame reserved seats as undermining merit or engendering reverse discrimination, a framing that can weaken public support (Ojo, 2023; Okeke & Uche, 2020). Media coverage also contextualises the political resistance to the bill in gendered terms, including party dominance by male elites, cultural scepticism towards women in politics, and fears about altering electoral dynamics (GMMP, 2020; Agbalajobi, 2019).

### 6. Discussion: Media Influence on Public Opinion and Policy

The media's dual role as informer and advocate means it can reinforce norms or challenge them:

- **Positive influence:** By providing balanced coverage of women's political issues, educating the public on the logic of quotas, and featuring women leaders' policy contributions.
- **Negative influence:** Through gendered framing that depreciates women politicians or sidelines substantive discussion of gender policies.

The impact of media narratives extends beyond public opinion into legislative spheres, as lawmakers are sensitive to public sentiment and media pressure, particularly during high-stakes policy debates on affirmative action and special seats (McCombs, 2014). Balanced and informed coverage can strengthen support for affirmative action, while gender-biased framing can weaken reform efforts (GMMP, 2020).

### Social Media Users' Responses to the Women's Representation and Special Seats for Women in Nigerian Political Policies

#### 1. Social Media Hashtags and Online Conversations

**#SpecialSeatsBill** has been used on platforms like **X (formerly Twitter)** to share opinions, debate the idea, and mobilize support with users reposting news stories, quotes from lawmakers, and slogans urging action on the Bill (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2021; GMMP, 2020). The hashtag itself appeared in multiple active posts and discussions about the proposed constitutional amendment to create special legislative seats for women (McCombs & Shaw, 2018).

Influential social media accounts, including advocacy pages like SideBySideNaija, have framed the Special Seats Bill as a response to long-standing imbalance and called on citizens to support greater inclusion of women in governance (Agbalajobi, 2019). Punch Newspapers' official X account highlighted *supportive voices online* that argued the Reserved Seats Bill will *ensure fair women representation* in the legislature, reflecting how news outlets and social media interact to shape the narrative (Oso, 2022).

#### 2. Online Activism and Organising

Social media has been used to **promote events and spaces focused on women's political inclusion**, for example, digital spaces (X/Twitter Spaces) inviting the public to discuss systemic barriers to women's leadership and brainstorm solutions for more effective representation (Ekwo & Ahmed, 2021). These discussions often combine data (e.g., women making up a small percentage of

legislators) with calls for action (Castells, 2015).

Instagram reels and Twitter posts from activists and gender organisations have emphasised that the Special Seats Bill is intended to **allow women to meaningfully contribute to law-making and policy development**, not just symbolically fill quotas (UN Women, 2021). These posts often underline that women's perspectives are crucial to addressing community and national issues, echoing broader public debates (Adebayo, 2022).

### 3. Tone and Themes in Social Media Discourse

Across platforms, *social media users* tend to frame the special seats discussion around a few recurring themes:

#### A. Correcting Historic Imbalances

Many posts underscore Nigeria's extremely low percentage of women in the legislature and the need for systemic change **to open space for women's voices in law-making**. This theme reflects broader media framing of the Bill as a corrective measure rather than a symbolic concession (Agbalajobi, 2019; Okeke & Uche, 2020).

#### B. Calls for Inclusive Democracy

Users often argue that *a truly democratic system must reflect the diversity of the population*, including women, and that social media should help push this message into public consciousness and legislative halls (Dahl, 2006; Ojebuyi, 2020).

#### C. Debates and Divergent Views

While many users support the idea, debates also emerge online about the *best way to promote women's representation*. Some social media users call for structural reforms within political parties instead of reserved constituencies. These views reflect broader controversies around affirmative action strategies globally (Krook, 2010; Ojo, 2023).

### 4. Social Media as a Mobilisation Tool

Social media conversations have not stayed purely online. They often **feed into offline action**, such as women's groups converging on National Assembly hearings, protests, and public campaigns that were promoted and coordinated online (Ekwo & Ahmed, 2021). For example, a coalition of more than 750 women was reported to press Nigerian lawmakers on the Special Seats Bill, showing how online narratives can translate into real-world mobilisation (Punch Newspapers, 2023).

## 5. The Broader Context: Media and Social Media in Women's Advocacy

The *online debate* does not occur in isolation; it complements traditional media coverage, civil society advocacy, and public protests. Social media amplifies voices that may otherwise go unheard, but it also reflects wider tensions in Nigerian society about gender, power, and representation (Oso, 2022). In particular, social media users often highlight that **social media and traditional media together shape public opinion and pressure lawmakers**, as seen in how news outlets' coverage gets reposted and debated across platforms, making media coverage part of a feedback loop with public sentiment (McCombs & Shaw, 2018).

### Summary of Social Media Impact on the Special Seats Debate

**Social media users and activists have actively done the following:**

1. A. Amplified **supportive narratives** about the Special Seats Bill and the need for affirmative action.
2. Used hashtags like **#SpecialSeatsBill** to centralise digital conversations and share news or opinion pieces.
3. Mobilised citizens to participate in public hearings and protests, creating cross-platform momentum.
4. Sparked **debates about effectiveness, fairness, and democratic inclusion**, reflecting diverse public attitudes online.

Overall, **social media in Nigeria** plays a significant role in shaping perceptions and encouraging civic action around the special seats for women's representation, reinforcing how contemporary digital communication influences political discourse (Castells, 2015; UN Women, 2021).

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the media's role in advancing women's political inclusion, the following are recommended :).

1. Policy Advocacy through Media Coalitions: Support cross-sector collaborations between media organisations, gender advocates, and research institutions to sustain informed debates on quotas and special seats.
2. Media Monitoring and Accountability: Establish mechanisms to monitor media coverage of women leaders and hold outlets accountable to gender equity standards.

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3. Public Education Campaigns: Utilise media platforms to educate citizens on affirmative action, quota logic, and the empirical benefits of inclusive governance.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The media holds significant potential to shape Nigeria's journey toward inclusive governance. By reframing narratives around women's leadership, advocating for structural reforms like special seats and quotas, and challenging sexist tropes, the media can contribute to transformative change. Given persistent gender imbalances in political representation, leveraging the media's agenda-setting power is essential to achieving constitutional ideals of gender equality and robust democratic participation (Castells, 2015; UN Women, 2022).

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