

BRIEFING NOTE

GENDER NORMS, MEDIA NARRATIVES AND WOMEN IN APPOINTIVE POSITIONS IN NIGERIA



By development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC)
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About the development Research and Projects Centre

The development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC) is a prominent Nigerian non-profit organisation, formed in 1993 to advance development knowledge and action through civil society collaborations in which gender is cross-cutting. The dRPC is at the forefront of conducting primary research on development issues and problems that impact the lives of women and girls using participatory and qualitative research methodologies. Its research findings generate evidence for advocacy engagements and offer up recommendations for policy and administrative reforms in Nigeria.

With a strong commitment to gender equality, good governance, and development, dRPC has played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse on development issues in Nigeria and has consistently worked to enhance the well-being and opportunities of marginalised communities. Over its 30 years of existence, the dRPC has consistently designed and managed development projects where it has trained, mentored, and provided seed funds to hundreds of civil society organisations (CSOs) and many government ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) at national and state levels, supporting both constituencies for effective participation in policy analysis and change.

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Key findings

- Nigerian media often exhibit bias against women in public appointive positions at the national level, portraying them as weak and incompetent and questioning their credibility. This contrasts with more neutral reporting on men holding similar positions, demonstrating a clear gender bias in media coverage. Such bias draws from, and reinforces, negative gender norms, and hampers the acceptance of women in public appointive positions whilst also reinforces gender inequalities.
- In both northern and southern regions, deeply ingrained gender stereotypes challenge women's suitability for public leadership. In Northern Nigeria, these stereotypes lead women to question their roles in the public domain and are rooted in religious and cultural norms. In Southern Nigeria, women strive to be confident and often rely on social institutions to function in public roles.
- In Northern Nigeria, women often have to rely on connections and networks with men to gain acceptance and leadership positions. In Southern states, political networks seem to have less influence on public appointments.
- There is a belief that government structures do not hamper women's leadership, yet women face structural and cultural biases, including harassment, unequal expectations, and discrimination by male superiors. These biases result in harsher judgements about women and hinder their access to leadership positions, despite their equal performance.
- Women appointees expressed frustration that societal expectations place higher demands on them because of their gender, believing that this prevents them from advancing in their roles.
- Education was seen as a powerful tool to support women appointees in the North, where many have postgraduate degrees. This reinforces the need to improve education access to overcome patriarchal norms and promote women in high-level appointive positions.

Key terms

Appointive positions: Roles within an organisation or government that are filled through appointments rather than elections or other means of selection. Those in appointive positions are chosen and appointed by higher authorities, typically on the basis of their qualifications, expertise, connections, or other relevant criteria. However, the selection criteria are also influenced by biases and stereotypes, including those based on gender, often resulting in discrimination and inequality in appointments.

Corruption: Corruption in the context of gender norms refers to the exploitation of traditional power imbalances between men and women, often perpetuating male dominance and undermining women's participation and influence in various spheres of society.

Disengagement: In the context of an appointed political office or position, this means that the person has been officially relieved of their duties or responsibilities. Reasons may include resignation, termination, retirement, or other circumstances that result in their disengagement from the office or position they previously held.

Elective positions: Roles within the legislative or other branches and institutions of the state that are filled through an electoral process where eligible voters choose their preferred candidates to hold these positions. These positions are characterised by their democratic nature as they are filled through a popular vote during elections.

High-level positions: Positions that are at the upper or more advanced end of a hierarchy, scale, or spectrum, indicating authority, responsibility, or expertise.

Media portrayal: The way in which the media portrays individuals, events, or issues. It involves the depiction, representation, and framing of information in media outlets such as newspapers, television, radio, and online platforms. Media portrayals include:

- **descriptive portrayals:** these present a comprehensive and often subjective portrayal of a story
- **factual portrayals:** emphasise accuracy, truth, and objectivity, and are typically devoid of subjective interpretation or embellishment.

Patriarchy: The social system and culture where men hold primary power and authority, and dominate over women, children and other groups in the family, society, or governance institutions.

Traditional and social media: Traditional media encompass established forms of mass communication such as newspapers, television, and radio, while social media refers to digital platforms – such as Facebook, Twitter (now called 'X') and Instagram – that enable user-generated content and interactive communication.

Introduction

'I don't think we are judged according to performance, because if we were, we wouldn't be denied any post.'

Female commissioner in Kano state

Deeply ingrained norms and traditions in Nigeria have systematically marginalised women, relegating them to subordinate roles within both public and private spheres. These entrenched gender biases have shaped a political landscape where men have traditionally occupied prominent positions, perpetuating the perception that politics is a male domain (Ajanaku, 2015). Nigeria's diverse religious and ethnic composition adds complexity to such gender dynamics, with diverse groups holding distinct views on the role of women in society and politics (Marshall, 2020).

Nigerian women continue to confront multifaceted challenges, including limited access to resources, political violence, cultural constraints, media biases and religious influences, all of which hinder their full participation in the political arena. This bias is reflected in women's political under-representation, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Trend analysis of women in federal cabinet in Nigeria, 1999–2023

Years/tenures	Ministerial positions			Female president, Vice president, Secretary to the Government of the Federation, Chief of staff	% of women ministers
	Men	Women	Total		
1999-2003	36	4	40	0	10%
2003-2007	33	10	43	0	23%
2007-2010	35	7	42	0	17%
2010-2011	25	4	29	0	14%
2011-2015	26	8	34	0	24%
2015-2019	33	6	39	0	15%
2019-2023	44	7	51	0	14%
2023-Present	39	9	48	0	19%
Total	271	55	326	0	17%

Note: A minister whose portfolio was only changed and not sacked within a specific administration is considered to be a minister. Figures as of October 2023.

Source: Oni and Ayomola 2013, PAWED-dRPC 2023, Angbulu 2023, Aworinde, 2023.

Between 1999 and 2023, the average percentage of female representatives in Nigeria's National Assembly was a mere 6% (PAWED-dRPC, 2023). Similarly, out of 326 ministerial appointments over the same period, only 55 (17%), were held by women (NBS, 2020; dRPC, 2023a; Channels TV, 2023). The situation is similarly bleak at the state level, with women accounting for only 17% of the 796 appointments made across the 36 states between 2019 and 2023 (Invictus Africa, 2023).

Gender norms influence women's representation in both appointive and elective positions – with the former being roles that are filled through appointments, while the latter are roles won via elections (Oni, 2014, Adegami and Uche, 2015; George, 2019). Norms also shape role assignment, experience and the exit of women from public appointive posts at national and sub-national levels in Nigeria (Oluyemi, 2016).

While men may face challenges, their experiences in public appointive positions differ from those of women. The public domain is viewed as men's natural space and their performance is judged according to the rules and masculine norms that prevail in that professional space. Women, however, are judged and often condemned through these patriarchal expectations, as seen in their treatment in the media (Oluyemi, 2016). Gender norms influence media reporting and narratives that can be either critical or supportive of women in high-level appointive posts.

As a result, gender norms and inadequate female representation in politics combine to have a profound and far-reaching impact on Nigeria's democracy. They limit the diversity of perspectives and experiences that are brought to the decision-making table with a risk that policies will not align with the diverse needs and aspirations of all citizens (Krook, 2020; Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2020). Failing to address women's involvement in politics obstructs progress towards gender equality and women's rights, including sexual and reproductive health, educational and occupational access, and protection from gender-based violence.

This research study examines how gender norms influence women's aspirations, motivations, opportunities, and experiences in appointive positions in Nigeria. It focuses, particularly on comparing sub-national and federal levels of governance and understanding biases held by male leaders in positions of power who are responsible for these political appointments. Through key informant interviews (KIIs) and a content analysis of narratives in traditional and social media about women who have been dismissed from appointive positions, this unique study aims to provide recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and activists on how to promote gender equality and social inclusion in appointive positions in Nigeria.

Women in appointive political positions

The importance of women in appointive political positions lies in their potential to advocate for and prioritise gender-sensitive policies, thereby promoting women's welfare and advancing gender equality (Ette and Akpan-Obong, 2022). Yet deeply ingrained stereotypes about women's leadership abilities and competence often influence decision-makers who make these appointments, such as presidents at the national level and governors at the state level, leading to the under-representation of women in top-level positions (Hayes and McAllister, 2019).

Research has shown that gender stereotypes portraying women as less capable or suited for leadership roles persist in many societies (Hayes and McAllister, 2019). These biases can result in women being overlooked or undervalued for appointments, despite their qualifications and experience. They can manifest in both formal and informal selection processes to affect women's chances of being considered for public appointive positions.

Women's political participation is also hampered during their appointments within government institutions, which are – like other parts of society – affected by unequal gender norms. Male-dominated work environments and traditional leadership styles create inhospitable conditions for women. Research has shown that organisational cultures that prioritise masculine traits and leadership styles disadvantage women who possess different leadership qualities (Krook and Restrepo Sanin, 2020).

Women in these positions also struggle to achieve any work-life balance. According to Haar et al. (2014) this balance represents an individual's self-assessment of how effectively they manage the diverse roles and responsibilities in their life. In Kirchmeyer's (2000) perspective, it entails

the achievement of fulfilling experiences in all aspects of life, requiring the effective allocation of human resources such as energy, time and commitment across these domains. The challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities have a disproportionate impact on the career advancement of women, and this constrains their opportunities for leadership roles within the public sector, as emphasised by Krook and Restrepo Sanin (2020).

Media portrayal of women in politics

Media portrayals capture the diverse ways in which the media depicts men and women, including the choice of language, visual representations, story placement and the selection of images and illustrations. The portrayal of women in the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and influencing societal norms.

In Nigeria, Idajili (2022) identifies a recurring and patronising tone in printed features that perpetuate notions of female inferiority. Such portrayals often cast women as weak, childlike, dependent, gullible, and illogical regardless of their educational or professional accomplishments. In addition to these perceptions, media portrayals often confine women to traditional and social accepted domestic roles as homemakers, wives, and mothers, while reserving participation in the public sphere predominantly for men (UN Women, 2022). Media coverage, therefore, remains far from impartial and often reflects gender biases, which manifest themselves in both the quality and quantity of coverage (African Union, 2019).

The patriarchal underpinnings of the African traditional and social media, suggest that there is also a further need to understand how new media – such as social media – present women in public positions. In Sharon's (2019) perspective, new media perpetuate patriarchal norms and negative depictions of women in ways that are similar to those seen in traditional media, as women remain devoid of agency in how they are depicted by the mass media. Ultimately, this reinforces entrenched notions of femininity, masculinity and dominant narratives related to capitalism and consumerism, as well as gender.

Nigeria's policy and legislative frameworks for women's representation

Recognising the need to increase women's participation, several Nigerian governments have adopted affirmative action policies, such as the National Policy on Women initiated in 2000. This aimed to increase women's representation to 30% within legislative and executive branches, including senior government positions. This target was later increased to 35% in the 2006 National Gender Policy (NGP) and again, to 50% in the revised National Gender Policy 2021–26.

Between 2015 and 2022, no fewer than seven bills, including a constitutional amendment, were introduced but faced rejection. Objections to these laws were rooted in moral, religious, cultural, and constitutional concerns, underscoring the complexities of trying to address gender norms in a diverse society like Nigeria. Indeed, nationwide efforts to create legislation that emphasises affirmative action to specify gender quotas or ceilings for positions have not succeeded.

At the state level however, Kwara State achieved a notable breakthrough in 2021 by introducing the Political Offices (Gender Composition) Law of 2021, a gender-focused law designed to promote affirmative action. As summarised in box 1, the adoption of this law was driven by a commitment to rectify historical gender imbalances in political representation, foster inclusivity in decision-making processes, and recognise the vital role played by women in the state's governance and development.

Box 1: A case study of Kwara State's 35% Affirmative Action Law

Nigeria's Kwara State passed its Political Offices (Gender Composition) Law (also known as the 35% Affirmative Action Law) in 2021 (Vanguard, 2021). This success was made possible by a combination of factors:

- an evolving socio-political landscape and changing attitudes towards women
- effective advocacy mobilisation campaigns by civil society organisations, progressive political leadership, and willpower on the part of the government
- a growing commitment to inclusive governance principles
- extensive engagement with stakeholders, such as traditional rulers, religious leaders, legislative and executive members, and
- the valuable insights gained from previous shortcomings (dRPC, 2023a).

The law was a remarkable shift, leading to a significant increase in female representation to over 40%. For example, between the 2015-2019 and 2019-2023 political period, the number of women commissioners more than doubled from four to nine. While all elective positions were occupied by men before the passage of the law, women accounted for 21% of these positions once the law came into force.

Regional differences in gender norms and politics

Nigeria's rich ethnic, religious, and cultural traditions can be seen in distinctive disparities. The country's Northern and Southern regions, which are characterised by unique historical, geographical, and socio-economic facets, exhibit varying gender norms and customs (Onukwube, 2019).

The Northern region, comprises of 19 states with a predominantly Muslim and Hausa-Fulani population, espouses a more conservative and patriarchal culture (Ejiogu, 2023). Traditionally, this culture ascribes leadership and decision-making roles to men, with women relegated to subordinate and supportive positions (Simon-Karu, 2022). As a result, these ingrained norms give rise to stereotypes and biases that undermine women's competence, credibility, and authority in appointive roles. They may be confronted by perceptions of having inferior qualifications, experience, or capability compared to their male counterparts, and often face harassment, intimidation, or discrimination (Renne, 2004). They may also face restrictions in terms of the sectors in which they can demonstrate their leadership, such as security or sports, while also being subjected to strict behavioural norms that limit their freedom and visibility (Agbaje, 2019).

In contrast, the Southern region, consisting of 17 states with a predominantly Christian and diverse ethnic composition, nurtures a more liberal and egalitarian culture. Here, the sociocultural values and environment encourage women to pursue their ambitions (Familusi, 2019). This more progressive culture opens avenues and incentives for women to access, and thrive in, appointive positions (Ajala and Wulemat, 2013). In addition, women benefit from training and mentoring programmes that augment their expertise and knowledge in their respective fields. The Southern region also tends to exhibit lower resistance or opposition from male colleagues or superiors who often acknowledge and respect women's achievements and contributions (George et al., 2016).

One example of the regional differences in gender norms and inequalities can be seen in women's participation in household decision-making. According to the 2008 and 2018 National Demographic and Health Surveys (NDHS), in the Southern region, specifically in Akwa Ibom and Oyo states, a higher percentage of women take responsibility for their own health care, participate actively in major household purchases, and visit their family or relatives on a regular basis. This demonstrates an increased level of autonomy and economic engagement among women in the Southern states.

In the Northern region, however, and particularly in Borno state, women report lower levels of involvement in their own health care, major household purchases and family visits. Although there has been some improvement over time, the Northern region still lags behind the Southern region in these aspects, indicating significant disparities between the two regions in women's empowerment, economic agency and mobility. As summarised in Table 2, it is evident that while there is progress in terms of women's participation in decision-making across all states and categories, substantial regional disparities persist.

Table 2: Percentage of married women aged 15–49 who participated in decision-making 2008 – 2018

Region	States	Woman's own health care			Major household purchases			Visits to her family or relatives		
		2008	2013	2018	2008	2013	2018	2008	2013	2018
Northern States	Borno	27.3	25.0	36.2	18.5	16.1	30.4	39.1	30.9	51.4
	Kano	6.2	1.4	33.0	6.3	1.1	7.0	4.6	1.9	41.2
Southern States	Akwa Ibom	63.6	54.9	81.4	44.9	61.6	66.9	82.6	67.9	86.7
	Enugu	58.2	63.7	62.8	59.4	62.3	55.5	64.1	69.5	64.9
	Oyo	67.7	73.4	94.1	41.1	75.8	82.3	92.0	85.7	97.5
National average		43.6	38.7	44.2	37.6	37.6	40.4	54.9	47.4	59.5

Source: NDX 2023.

The regional differences in gender norms and politics have far-reaching implications at the federal level in Nigeria. They influence not only the representation of women, but also the informal practices and power dynamics within the federal government. The informal practice of rotations between Christian and Muslim leadership at the federal level and its associated Northern-Southern regional implications affect women's access to key positions, as well as the gender composition of federal leadership.

Research objectives and methodology

Comparative research on gender norms and appointive positions across national, sub-national and cross-regional political levels is a vital and timely contribution to the field of gender studies, political science, and policy development in Nigeria, given the dearth of peer reviewed publications on this issue. This research sheds light on gender norms as a key barrier to women's political representation and gender equality in the country. By identifying the drivers and barriers of norm change, it is hoped that this study can guide the development of context-specific policies and interventions that promote women's participation and representation in appointive positions that are, at present, controlled and dominated by men.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the media describe and present the strengths, skills, and competence of women and men in appointive positions?
2. Are narratives about men and women presented differently?
3. To what extent do the narratives capture the voices and positions of men and women?
4. Are there noticeable threats of negative language in the narratives that support or challenge men and women who have been disengaged (let go or forced out) from their roles?
5. Do gender norms detected in media narratives and held by male politicians contribute towards bias in the selection of women into appointive positions at the national and sub-national levels?
6. Are there differences between the national and sub-national levels in the representation of women in appointive positions?
7. What are the appropriate actions to address these challenges?

This study adopted a qualitative design to provide a rich and detailed description and explanation of these phenomena and to identify the context-specific factors that influence them – cultural, social, economic, or religious – for a national and sub-national level of study.

The study compared the discourses around men and women who had disengaged from national-level positions, across five key ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) in Nigeria. Table 3 outlines the institutions and positions analysed for this study and a description of the mandates or responsibilities associated with that institution or position. By examining and comparing the experiences of both male and female leaders in these positions, this analysis aims to uncover gender disparities, biases and obstacles within the disengagement processes and the underpinning norms from which they arise.

The selection of these specific officials was driven by the need to analyse roles that have been occupied by both a man and a woman who was disengaged, to enable the analysis of potential gender bias in their disengagements. Their high-level appointive positions also made their experiences relevant for an understanding of the influence of broader gender norms and attitudes on leadership and governance.

Table 3: Institution, position, and description of mandates from ministries, departments, and agencies

	Position and institution	Description of role
1	Managing Director, Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA)	Responsible for overseeing and improving the efficiency and competitiveness of Nigeria's ports.
2	Director-General, National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP)	Responsible for preventing and combating human trafficking, especially involving women and children.
3	Director-General, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)	Leads investigations into various financial crimes in Nigeria.
4	Managing Director, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC)	Focuses on the development of Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region through various socio-economic initiatives.
5	Ministry of Finance	Advises the Federal Government on national development, economic management and various financial and regulatory responsibilities.

Source: Various taken from links in table

Table 4 summarises the male and female appointees and the sources of media narratives about them, including the following:

- Social media commentaries collected by curating publicly available discourse on two social media platforms – Facebook and Twitter (now called 'X'¹). Data were scraped through Twitter API keys, Sns scrape, a Social Network Site (SNS) scraper in Python, and online web scraping tools. More than 3,000 comments were scraped, with a total of 2,603 commentaries analysed after cleaning. The timeframe for data scrape is set to within a month of the news of the position holder's disengagement.
- Electronic print media, such as newspapers and magazines were reviewed via publically available electronic copies and accessing digital archives.
- Data on TV programmes addressing the negative portrayal or disengagement of women were acquired through the collection of transcripts.

Table 4: Breakdown of scraped data for each of the political appointees

	Social media (Facebook, Twitter)	Print media	Books and peer- reviewed knowledge products	TV programmes	TOTAL
Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA)					
Hadiza Bala Usman (W)	448	76	1	1	526
Mr. Habibi Abdullahi (M)	12	30	0	0	42
National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP)					
Julie Okah-Donli (W)	87	14	0	1	102
Senator Basheer Mohammed (M)	13	29	0	2	44
Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)					
Farida Waziri (W)	382	67	1	1	451
Nuhu Ribadu (M)	2	10	2	1	15
Managing director of Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC)					
Joy Nunieh (W)	71	17	0	2	90

Source: Compiled by authors

1 While the authors recognise 'Twitter' is now called 'X', this change took place during the research and most participants referred to it as 'Twitter'. For simplicity, this study will use the name 'Twitter' throughout this briefing note.

A qualitative content analysis of the scraped data was conducted with a coding system that was developed to tease out gender from narratives in the public space. The coding system focused on the nine parameters listed in Table 5. This comprehensive approach facilitated the extraction and identification of gender-related narratives and themes within these public narratives, shedding light on the intricacies surrounding these leadership transitions.

Table 5: Gender content analysis code

Indicator	Gender norms for women	Gender norms for men
Lexicon	Descriptive (presenting comprehensively and often subjectively)	Factual (presenting accurately and objectivity, typically devoid of subjective interpretation)
Tone	Judgemental	Technical
Performance indicator	Personality based	Competency based
Voice	Child-like	Adult-like
Terms	Long narratives with interchangeable and multiple terms	Short narratives with single use terms repeated
Scope	Private/public life	Public life
Depth	Historical life history and contemporary	Contemporary, not time-based
Inference	High degree of inference	Factual with limited inference
Interest groups	Male stakeholders, commentators and media interest	Male stakeholders, commentators, media, males who were disengaged defending themselves, with no women as interest groups

Source: Developed by authors

In addition to discourse and narrative analysis, the study used KIIs with women who had held appointive positions and had completed their terms in five states: Borno and Kano in the north of Nigeria; and Akwa Ibom, Enugu and Oyo in the south. Women appointees who were selected represented a purposeful sample. For each of the female participants (20 in total), one man who worked with them and supported them and one who did not support them were also interviewed (40 in total). The supporters and the opposers were identified by the women through snowballing techniques. The women had worked with both and could determine which ones were respectful and inclusive gender equality advocates who would challenge stereotypes, promote women's leadership, listen actively to women's opinions, promote diversity, and engage in constructive criticism. The men selected included policymakers, practitioners, activists, media professionals and religious leaders.

Borno and Kano states were chosen as typical Northern states because they represent the two main sub-regions, the North East and the North West, that have the lowest levels of women's representation in appointive positions in Nigeria (Oluyemi, 2016). These two states also have some of the highest rates of poverty, illiteracy, insecurity, and violence, which pose additional challenges for women in politics (Partners West Africa, 2019; Oluyemi, 2016). In addition, Borno and Kano states have different political affiliations and dynamics that may influence women's participation and representation in appointive positions. Borno state, for example, is governed by the All-Progressives Congress (APC), which is the ruling party at the federal level, while Kano state is governed by the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP), which is a relatively new political party that emerged in 2023.

Akwa Ibom, Enugu, and Oyo were chosen as typical Southern states because they represent the three main sub-regions with higher levels of women's representation (Oluyemi, 2016) and some of the highest rates of education, income, and development in Nigeria. Again, these states have different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds that may shape their gender norms and practices. Akwa Ibom state is predominantly Christian and Efik-Ibibio (Effiong and Akpan, 2020); Enugu state is predominantly Christian and Igbo; and Oyo state is predominantly Muslim and Yoruba (Open Data Africa, 2014).

Ethical considerations

Key ethical facets were addressed during this study, particularly in the sub-national competent with its primary data collection. These facets included voluntary participation and informed consent, the provision of comprehensive information on the study's objectives, methods, procedures, potential risks, and benefits, expected outcomes, the right to withdraw, anonymity, and confidentiality. Confidentiality was particularly important for the snowballing of male supporters and opposers to take part in Klls to ensure the safety and confidentiality of the women who had suggested them, and all responses were anonymised. The researchers ensured that male influencers did not know the women who had identified them by using a general descriptor rather than specific names or details. Overall, a combination of informed consent, strong data security practices, and careful handling of the interviews were used to maintain the women's safety and their trust in the research process.

Limitation of the study

The national-level study relies on media representations of gender norms, which may not provide an accurate reflection of the attitudes and beliefs of the broader population. They can be influenced by editorial biases, commercial interests, and political agendas, which may not align with the reality of gender norms in Nigeria. While media analysis focused exclusively on the national level and did not encompass subnational disengagement issues, Klls captured perspectives solely from the sub-national context. While future research should complement these finding by analysing the respective missing levels, the comparative analysis of data in this study allowed for the triangulation and complementarity of this study's findings.

Key findings

The findings of this study are organised into three sections. The first summarises how media portrays different norms for women and men in appointive positions on the national level. The second section identifies how these norms operate on a state level with a geographical comparison between northern and southern states. The final section then identifies strategies and responses women use against the discrimination they experience.

Media portrayals

This section discusses gender norms in media reports of women and men who disengaged from public national offices between 2008 and 2023. It focuses on media portrayal of their competence, conflicts and the qualities of their character through the use of differentiated lexicon, tone, scope and other framing and narrative structures.

Lack of skills, competence and qualifications

Media reports exhibited clear bias against women, as exemplified by the narratives about EFCC appointees shown in Table 6. Women are depicted as lacking strength and competence, undermining their credibility, as shown in an article in *The Cable* (Nwabufo, 2016).

Table 6: Gender-biased media headlines

Male	Female
Embattled EFCC Chairman, Ribadu dismissed	Why I sacked Farida Waziri
The rise, fall and rise again of Nuhu Ribadu	Farida Waziri has history of lying against ex-presidents
Nuhu Ribadu: Nigeria's relentless corruption hunter	Jonathan fires Farida Waziri from EFCC
How I got my dismissal, demotion reversed	Farida Waziri's bubble burst
My removal designed to destroy EFCC	Farida Waziri, excuses cannot fight corruption
Obasanjo: Why Ribadu was sacked by Umaru Yar'adua	Farida Waziri was a disaster to Nigeria's anti-corruption war

Source: Compiled by authors from various media reports

For example, Adeosun (MF) and Waziri (EFCC) faced accusations of incompetence, with the Tribune Online, calling Adeosun 'Slump', meaning periods or phases of decline and decrease (Olanrewaju, 2018). Waziri was deemed ineffective in her role, and a piece in the *Premium Times* shared reports that she was not qualified for it and had been removed for incompetence:

'The former president had told a publication of the EFCC, *Zero Tolerance*, that Mrs. Waziri was a disaster to Nigeria's effort against corruption, questioning her qualification for the appointment in the first place.'
Ekott, 2013

In contrast, Ribadu (EFCC), was celebrated as 'effective', a 'no-nonsense man', and a 'dogged fighter' against corruption. His dismissal was framed as a witch-hunt and as 'corruption fighting back'. He received national sympathy and was later awarded the Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani Anti-Corruption Excellence Award. A *Vanguard* article called Ribadu 'embattled' suggestive of victimhood (Vanguard, 2008), while another headline stated that 'Ribadu's sack aimed at punishing key voice in fight against corruption' (VOA, 2009).

A variation of the competency discourse can be seen with regards to qualifications. A piece in *Premium Times* and *Business Day* on the removal of Okah-Donli (NAPTIP), noted that she was 'unqualified for the position' (Akinpelu, 2020a) and that 'Buhari axed her months before the end of her four-year tenure' (Ochei, 2023). Media reports emphasised Okah-Donli's career history, highlighting her past roles as a lawyer and executive assistant to imply that these roles did not prepare her for the NAPTIP position: '[she] has a low profile that does not qualify her for the job' (Akinpelu, 2020b).

In sharp contrast, the media reports on Senator Mohammed's appointment and subsequent disengagement were relatively neutral in tone. They did not use value-informed language or question his qualifications for the role, which were equal to those of Okah-Donli. Instead, articles highlighted power struggles within the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development as a key factor in his removal:

'Power play in the top hierarchy of the Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development ministry led to the sacking of the senator who represented Kano Central between 2011 and 2015.'
Daily Trust, 2021b

Finally, media often commented on the family connections of women appointees and their various 'godfathers', attributing their success to external factors and undermining their professional

achievements. Such reporting is less pronounced for men, reinforcing gender stereotypes about skills, competencies, and qualifications.

Reports on Usman (NPA), for example, often emphasised her family connections and implied that her position was linked to her family background. According to a media report that describes her relationship with the people, her perceived proximity to the presidency and the support she received from her '*foster father*', Governor El-Rufai of Kaduna State, have fostered in her a '*false sense of invincibility and uncommon confidence*' (Eyewitness News, 2021).

In contrast, media reports about Mr. Abdullahi (NPA) did not delve into his family connections or personal attributes in the same manner. For example, the *Kete Ekiti Post* (2015) and *Shipping Position* (Joshua, 2015) reported that no reason is adduced like in the case of Habib Abdullahi. The media provided minimal or negligible details about the circumstances surrounding his termination.

Similarly, media narratives also emphasise the influence of male political figures, such as James Ibori (a Nigerian politician who served as the Governor of Delta State in Nigeria from 1999 to 2007), acting as '*godfathers*' behind Waziri's appointment. According to an article in *The Nation*:

'Farida Waziri, with the backing of James Ibori and Bukola Saraki was appointed by Yar'adua as Ribadu's successor. In spite of her godfathers, she was fired by Jonathan on November 23, 2011, allegedly over her investigation into the fuel subsidy scam.'
Oluwajuyitan, 2023

The '*godfather*' narrative presentation has not been as pronounced for any of the male chairmen, even though they also enjoyed the backing of powerful stakeholders.

At the sub-national level, political godfathers do often play a significant role in women's appointive positions, even if those women are highly qualified and educated. Many competent women are believed to require political godfathers to secure such positions.

Insubordination and conflict

Media reports about women in national-level appointive positions, like Usman, often depict them as challenging authority and acting independently – actions that are portrayed negatively. Female leaders are also shown in media as entangled in power struggles and conflicts with male counterparts or superiors, with these disputes sometimes cited as reasons for their removal from leadership roles. This portrayal has been particularly evident in cases involving Okah-Donli and Usman, as a piece in *Vanguard* demonstrates:

'She is also a daughter of late Fulani historian and popular academic Dr Yusufu Bala-Usman of the ruling family of Sullubawa clan. In a country in which where you come from contributes substantially to how far you can go, she appears to have some of the most interesting recipes for upward mobility suited for the time. And she probably knew it. So as the head of an important agency like the Nigerian Ports Authority, from the same state as President Buhari, she conducted herself with a certain feeling of

entitlement, close to invincibility. An attitude that some people consider as hubristic.'

Zubairu, 2021

Several media also reported that the inability of Amaechi, the Minister of Transportation, to control over Usman eventually led to her dismissal. As a *Pulse* article reported:

'He just couldn't control her anymore. She refused to do his bidding and that became a problem as you would expect. It was akin to biting the hand that fed her, in his reckoning. She challenged some of his orders and directives. Amaechi felt she was rubbing her powers in his face because of her direct access to the president.'

Edokwe, 2021

Other accounts (e.g. Zubairu, 2021) contend that Usman's plight was the result of her past criticism of the nation's lax security, which may have caused her removal – the implication being that women are unable to provide the government wise counsel on matters they believe to be detrimental to progress.

In contrast, Abdullahi was cleared and appointed back to his position after being charged with insubordination for refusing to give the former President Jonathan's campaign team access to the agency's treasury (as other ministries and parastatals had done). The NPA personnel depicted Mr Abdullahi as a feudal Lord who controlled the agency with iron fists like an emperor (Business Hallmark, 2016).

Character attacks: emotions and honour

Women's leadership styles are depicted very differently at the sub-national level. They are highly regarded by their male supporters, who emphasise qualities such as intelligence, diligence, reliability, sincerity, straightforwardness, accommodation, and attentiveness. However, male colleagues who did not support them during their time in public office used negative language to disparage women bosses, often aiming to disqualify them or tarnish their reputation. They used infantilising terms like '*manipulate*,' '*trust easily*' and character attacks to embarrass women.

Similarly, media reports about national-level female appointees portray them negatively, using gendered language, such as labelling Nunieh as having a '*temperament problem*,' and being '*wild*.' An article in the *Independent* reported that:

'Ever since she was sacked, Ms Nunieh has become very frustrated and, in a typical 'I-will-not-go-down-alone' syndrome, has been making wild and unsubstantiated allegations against those she perceived may have been responsible for her downfall.'

Independent, 2020

The coverage also tends to be sensationalised, with dramatic headlines and phrases such as '*slapped*' and '*berserk*', potentially distorting facts and contributing to a hostile media environment. The *Icon Magazine* headline read: '*Sacked NDDC MD, Joy Nunieh Goes Berserk After Being Caught in the Web of Certificate Forgery*' (Icon Magazine, 2020). Media reports infantilised Nunieh by suggesting she should accept her dismissal graciously, implying that she was throwing a tantrum.

Female leaders faced not only character attacks, but they also reported instances of sexual harassment, which – far from encouraging sympathy – were sometimes used to discredit them. The media often amplified these stories, contributing to a hostile environment for female appointees. In the context of addressing issues related to sexual misconduct, a statement like 'Yes, I am accusing him of sexual harassment' (Iroanusi, 2020) serves as a formal accusation or disclosure of such behaviour made by an individual. Instead of competent authorities and the media taking Nunieh's allegations of sexual harassment seriously and investigating them, the media and others often dismissed them, thereby handing the Minister a megaphone to consistently refute and belittle her.

In one report, he claimed she had a 'temperament' problem, which is why he dismissed her from office. He then backed up his bad temperament claim by saying: 'you don't need to ask me; you can ask about four husbands that she married' as reported on *Pulse.ng* (Nwachuckwu, 2020). The same report further stated that:

'No matter the allegation, I wish that she will go to the hospital, see a doctor, take some injections, and relax. I'm not saying there is something wrong with her, I'm saying there is something wrong with her temperament.'

Nwachuckwu, 2020

The stories were somewhat dismissive of her serious allegations, and instead gave credence to the Minister's narrative, that the MD was 'crazy', 'unstable', 'in need of psychological help', 'insubordinate/stubborn', and 'difficult/rigid'.

Joy Nunieh was described in print as a 'serial divorcee', 'emotionally unstable', and one social media comment went as far as tagging her 'a crazy feminist'. A senior politician, reacting to the media onslaught on Nunieh came to her rescue, but also referred to her personal attributes to suggest that 'Nunieh is not crazy, wayward or flippant' (Olowolagba, 2020).

These character traits are rarely, if ever, used by media to report on men. It is exceptionally difficult to find a man being described as a 'misogynist' or 'chauvinist' in the media even though such men are found across all facets of professional life. Therefore, a difference in tone is easily discerned in reporting between genders.

Female appointees like Adeosun who faced National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) certificate scandals were pressured to resign, while male counterparts like Adebayo Shittu, who faced similar issues, dismissed similar allegations and the media soon lost interest. Adeosun received extensive media attention with critical headlines that described her as 'dishonourable' and she was aggressively scrutinised for her integrity, creating a narrative of moral failure. A *Cable* article stated that:

'Adeosun missed the chance to bow out honorably when, rather than throw in the towel, she clung on desperately to the job. She could have resigned when NYSC stopped short of hanging her, incredulously claiming its records showed she applied but also adding it would 'investigate the purported exemption certificate'. Were it not for sustained pressure from *Premium Times*, the civil society, and other sections of the Nigerian public, she would have hung on to the job.'

Soyombo, 2018

Male counterparts facing similar scandals did not resign and received minimal media coverage. Notably, Adeosun is not the first public office appointee with an NYSC certificate scandal, as several others faced such controversies without resigning: former Minister of Aviation Stella Oduah, former Managing Director of Nigeria Social Insurance Trust Fund Michael Akabogu, former Minister of Communication Adebayo Shittu, former NDDC MD Joy Nunieh, former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Power Louis Edozien, and the present Governor of Enugu State Peter Mbah. Unlike others who dismissed their NYSC scandal, Adeosun felt a moral obligation to resign after learning of the investigation's findings, indicating differing responses to lapses in integrity.

The example of Adeosun, in particular, demonstrates the dissonance between technical reasons for disengagement from public office and the sensationalised allegations reported in the media. Despite the fact that she has to resign as the Federal Minister of Finance, the media coverage focused overwhelmingly on her performance, her credentials and the imminent threat of being sacked prior to her departure, including an article in *Premium Times* (Abdulaziz, 2018).

Table 7 compares the reasons for disengagement reported in the media with the official reasons offered by the Government. It shows that while official reasons were given for three of the five women disengaged; official reasons were given for the only one of the five male officials disengaged.

Table 7: Media framing of the reasons for disengagement versus the Government's official explanations

Men and women political appointees	Media framing of the issues	Government's official reasons for disengagement
Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA)		
Hadiza Bala Usman (W)	Alleged failure to remit N165 billion operating surplus to the cover of federal government, insubordination between her and the supervising Minister of Transportation.	<p><i>'President Muhammadu Buhari has approved the recommendation of the Ministry of Transportation under Rt. Hon. Rotimi Amaechi for the setting up of an Administrative Panel of Inquiry to investigate the Management of the Nigerian Ports Authority, NPA. The President has also approved that the Managing Director, Hadiza Bala Usman steps aside while the investigation is carried out. Mr Mohammed Koko will act in that position. The panel is to be headed by the Director, Maritime Services of the Ministry while the Deputy Director, Legal of the same ministry will serve as Secretary. Other members of the panel will be appointed by the Minister.'</i></p> <p>The Senior Special Assistant to the President on Media and Publicity, Garba Shehu, 2021. (Ripples Nigeria, 2021: www.ripplesnigeria.com/presidency-gives-reason-for-suspending-mpa-boss-hadiza-usman).</p>
Mr. Habibi Abdullahi (M)	Compromising the neutrality of NPA as landlord and the Federal Government as umpire in the industry over the controversial acquisition of a 10% stake in Onne, Rivers State-based terminal operator; Integrated Logistics Service (INTELS), dredging of Calabar channel and APC -PDP political game	<p><i>'President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan has approved the appointment of Alhaji Sanusi Lamido Ado Bayero as the Managing Director of the Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA). Alhaji Sanusi, a lawyer, from Kano State takes over from Mallam Habib Abdullahi who has been relieved of his appointment as Managing Director of the NPA. The appointment of the new NPA Managing Director takes effect from tomorrow, Thursday, April 30 2015. President Jonathan thanks the outgoing Managing Director for his services and wishes him well in his future endeavours.'</i></p> <p>Former Presidential Spokeperson to the President, Reuben Abati, 2015. (Ships & Ports, 2015: shipsandports.com.ng/how-habib-abdullahi-received-news-of-his-sack-from-mpa).</p>

Men and women political appointees	Media framing of the issues	Government's official reasons for disengagement
National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP)		
Julie Okah-Donli (W)	No issue identified but insinuations of incompetence	<p><i>'President Muhammadu Buhari has approved the appointment of Imaan Sulaiman-Ibrahim as the new Director-General of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP). Holder of BSc (Sociology), Masters of Arts (Management) and Masters of Business Administration (MBA) degrees, Mrs Sulaiman-Ibrahim, hails from Nasarawa State. Until her new appointment, she was a member of the Nasarawa State Economic Advisory Council as well as Special Adviser on Strategic Communication to the Minister of State for Education.'</i></p> <p>Senior Special Assistant to the President on Media and publicity, Garba Shehu, 1 December 2020. (TVC News, 2020: www.tvcnews.tv/2020/12/imaan-sulaiman-ibrahim-replaces-okah-donli-as-new-dg-for-naptip).</p>
Senator Basheer Mohammed (M)	Power play in the top hierarchy of the Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development ministry	<p><i>'President has approved the appointment of Fatima Waziri-Azi as the replacement of Mohammed. The appointment was sequel to a recommendation of the Minister of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development, Hajiya Sadiya Umar Farouq.'</i></p> <p>Senior Special Assistant to the President on Media and Publicity, Garba Shehu, 8 September 2021. (Daily Trust, 2021a: dailytrust.com/just-in-buhari-fires-naptip-dg).</p> <p>Garba Shehu said the minister expressed the 'urgent need for the Ministry to intensify on the existing capacity in the NAPTIP in order to achieve its Key Result Areas as identified: pedigree, vast experience and proven track record to drive the agency forward and consolidate on what has been achieved so far'.</p>
Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)		
Farida Waziri (W)	Probe of the oil subsidy fraud	<p><i>'When I give you a job, I will give you time to do it. Assuming somebody, who is heading an agency that is supposed to handle corruption, is not doing that and says it is because of the President's body language, that person is not competent. I am one Nigerian that has the privilege of holding this office that gives these people the latitude to do their work. I am happy that Nigerians have confidence in EFCC and in its Chairman, Ibrahim Lamorde and I also have confidence in him. I have no personal relationship with Lamorde. He even investigated me while I was the governor of Bayelsa State. But I have confidence in him, given his track record.'</i></p> <p><i>'Of course, there was a lady who was there. There were lots of complaints. Some may be right, some may be wrong, but perception matters so much when handling matters like corruption. The confidence of the people must be there. I had to remove her and that does not mean that she is guilty of the allegations, but because I saw that Nigerians no longer had confidence in her.'</i></p> <p>Goodluck Jonathan, 13 September 2013. (Gista Naija, 2013: gistanigeria.blogspot.com/2013/09/why-i-sacked-farida-waziri-jonathan.html).</p> <p><i>'It must be pointed out that former President Jonathan had no personal issues with Mrs. Waziri. The former President had to eventually let her go in the national interest. Her removal, therefore, has a lot to do with reasons relating to Nigeria's interest and global standing which details Dr. Goodluck Jonathan is obliged to keep as state secret in our common national interest. It is very important to note that when dealing with the interest of the nation and the performance of the functions of a public office, a determined leader cannot prioritise the interest of an individual. It, therefore, bears repeating here that Mrs Waziri's removal as chairperson of EFCC had absolutely nothing to do with her purported refusal to desist from probing any oil individual.'</i></p> <p>Goodluck Jonathan in a statement signed by his media aide, Ikechukwu Eze, 11 February 2020. (Jonathan, 2020: www.vanguardngr.com/2020/02/former-efcc-boss-farida-waziri-sacked-in-national-interest-jonathan)</p>

Men and women political appointees	Media framing of the issues	Government's official reasons for disengagement
<p>Nuhu Ribadu (M)</p>	<p>Nuhu Ribadu petition against the Yar'adua candidacy as the PDP presidential flagbearers towards the 2007 general elections; James Ibori corruption scandal; pressure by politicians with corruption cases</p>	<p><i>'The President feels sad about the blackmail which has become almost a permanent feature now. The moment the EFCC chairman has issues with any public official, be it the Attorney General or the IGP, the next thing you would hear is that the President wants to remove him to protect some corrupt former governors [...] Ribadu will attend NIPSS like other officers so recommended.'</i></p> <p>Special Adviser to President Umaru Yar'Adua on Communications, Mr. Olusegun Adeniyi. (Sahara Reporter, 2008: saharareporters.com/2008/01/02/ribadu-yet-get-posting-letter-pm-news).</p> <p><i>'AIG Nuhu Ribadu is not being sent on course for any ulterior motive other than the reasons I have explained; he is not being sent to NIPSS on the prompting of any external body or bodies. He has met the conditions of service and qualifies to be nominated to attend a course at NIPSS.'</i></p> <p>Former Inspector General of Police, Sir Mike Okiro, 2 January 2008. (Oyibos Online, 2007: www.oyibosonline.com/ribadu-asked-to-go-on-study-leave).</p>
<p>Managing director of Niger Development Commission (NDDC)</p>		
<p>Joy Nunieh (W)</p>	<p>Alleged NYSC certificate forgery and corruption</p>	<p><i>'Re: A case of Non-Possession of Valid NYSC certificate by Joy Nunieh, Acting MD of NDDC an Urgent Call for Redress: Kindly find the attached coy of subject correspondent from the Anti-Corruption and Accountability Coalition Against Corruption for your review and action as appropriate.'</i></p> <p>Former Chief of Staff to the president, Late Abba Kyari, 4 February 2020. (MetroNews NG, 2020: www.metronews.ng/joy-nunieh-real-reasons-she-lost-out-as-nddc-md).</p> <p><i>'President Muhammadu Buhari has approved the enlargement of the Interim Management Committee (IMC) of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) from three to five. The five members of the committee are now: Professor Kemebradikumo Daniel Pondei, who is the Ag. Managing Director, replacing Barrister Joy Nunieh; Dr Cairo Ojoungboh, Ag. Executive Director (Projects); Mr Ibanga Bassey Etang, Ag. Executive Director (Finance and Administration); Mrs Caroline Nagbo (Member); and Cecilia Bukola Akintomide, OON, a former Vice President with African Development Bank, (Member).'</i></p> <p>Former Special Adviser to the President on Media and Publicity, Mr Femi Adesina, 19 February 2020 (Ogundeli, 2020: thenationonlineng.net/update-buhari-replaces-nunieh-with-pondei-as-nddc-acting-md).</p> <p><i>'She ignored the letter written to her by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry directing her to attend a meeting of the Federal Executive Council, FEC. [...] She felt that she is bigger than the Minister because she has a bigger budget.'</i></p> <p>Former Minister of Niger Delta Sen. Godwill Akpabio, 20 July 2020. (Alhassan, 2020: dailynigerian.com/why-i-sacked-nunieh-by-akpabio).</p>
<p>Professor Kemebradikumo Daniel Pondei (M)</p>	<p>Alleged diversion of public funds.</p>	<p><i>'President Muhammadu Buhari has approved the appointment of an interim administrator to oversee the affairs of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). He is Mr Effiong Okon Akwa, the Ag. Executive Director, Finance and Administration of the Commission, who is to assume headship till completion of the forensic audit. The development became necessary as a result of a plethora of litigation and a restraining order issued recently against the Interim Management Committee of the NDDC by a Federal High Court in Abuja. The development became necessary as a result of a plethora of litigation and a restraining order issued recently against the Interim Management Committee of the NDDC by a Federal High Court in Abuja.'</i></p> <p>Former Special Adviser to the President on Media and Publicity, Mr Femi Adesina, 12 December 2020. (Onyesi, 2020: dailypost.ng/2020/12/12/buhari-sacks-pondei-led-nddc-interim-management-committee).</p>

Men and women political appointees	Media framing of the issues	Government's official reasons for disengagement
Federal Minister of Finance		
Kemi Adeosun (W)	Alleged NYSC certificate forgery	<p>'President Muhammadu Buhari Friday accepted the resignation of the Hon. Minister of Finance, Mrs Kemi Adeosun. The President thanked the Minister for her services to the nation and wished her well in her future pursuits. The President also approved that the Minister of State Budget and National Planning, Mrs Zainab Ahmed, should oversee the Ministry of Finance with effect from today.'</p> <p>Former Special Adviser to the President on Media and Publicity, Mr Femi Adesina, 14 September 2018. (www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/283759-breaking-buhari-accepts-kemi-adeosuns-resignation.html).</p> <p>'I have, today, become privy to the findings of the investigation into the allegation made in an online medium that the Certificate of Exemption from National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) that I had presented was not genuine. This has come as a shock to me and I believe that in line with this administration's focus on integrity, I must do the honourable thing and resign.'</p> <p>Former Finance Minister, Kemi Adeosun, 14 September 2018. (Premium Times, 2018: www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/283759-breaking-buhari-accepts-kemi-adeosuns-resignation.html).</p>
Mansur Mukhtar (M)	The end of Yara'Adua-Jonathan led government: President Jonathan opted for the total dissolution of the late Umaru Yar'Adua cabinet, as a means of asserting his control of the council.	<p>'...the acting President, Goodluck Jonathan has dissolved the Federal Executive Council. The acting president gives no reason for the dissolution. There is no vacuum in the government as permanent secretaries will take charge.'</p> <p>Former Minister of Information, the late Dora Akunyili, 17 March 2010. (Smith, 2010: www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/17/nigeria-acting-president-sacks-cabinet; Osodi, 2010: https://josephekwu.wordpress.com/2010/03/18/goodluck-jonathan-sacks-ministers).</p>

Source: Compiled by authors from various media sources.

Gender norms that affect women appointees at state level

This section summarises how gender norms, as seen in media portrayals of appointees on the national level, can also be seen at the sub-national level and shape the choices of male politicians when appointing women to high-level public offices in northern and southern regions. As a former Commissioner in Borno state remarked:

'The society still believes that women should not be in leadership position, especially in the executive.'

Both northern and southern regions grapple with deeply ingrained stereotypes about women being unsuitable for leadership roles underpinned by two sets of norms:

'Women being subordinate and therefore better suited to be supporters and followers and women being too trusting and easily manipulated and, therefore, unfit for leadership.'

While these norms function as barriers in both regions, their nature differs. In the northern regions, they often intimidate and limit women's ambitions. For example, a former female Commissioner in Borno state stated:

'Societal norms and beliefs have instilled fear and reservations on the women folk to the extent that they accept anything that is thrown at their face!'

In contrast, participants from the southern region emphasised the need for women to have courage to fight and to confront biases. A female Commissioner in Enugu state urged women leaders to overcome these biases, saying:

'Don't be intimidated. Don't feel intimidated. Don't begin to give excuses. These are strategies you know; you should be up to your job. Up to your job, you know, be ready to be committed. Be ready to perform. Be ready to achieve.'

Study participants in the south recognised women's inherent potential to excel in leadership roles, even within male-dominated contexts. This acknowledgment of women's talent and capabilities differs somewhat from the northern viewpoint, which doesn't echo this sentiment explicitly.

Leadership skills and competence to navigate politics

'Nigeria as a whole is still seeing women as supporters; that is why we have not even had a female elected governor throughout our period of democracy.'

A supporter of a female appointee in Akwa Ibom State

Women's qualifications and capacity to lead are often viewed as secondary to their more socially accepted role as submissive figures in the public domain. This is the case in both the Southern and Northern regions of Nigeria, with these views being held more strongly in the North. Even in the South, however, where there is greater acceptance of a role for women in the public domain, they are still relegated to supportive roles rather than positions of authority. A vocal male opposer of a woman official in Akwa state explained this viewpoint as follows:

'No matter how we tend to say that women can be heard, those norms are still in our subconscious. Men in the society still play the dominant role.'

As a result, women are often overlooked for leadership roles, which hinders their advancement, indecision-making and authoritative roles. One male supporter of a female Commissioner from Oyo emphasised that such norms are informed by religious beliefs, saying:

'Even in some religions, women are not supposed to be in prominent positions. They are to be in the background, not to be seen. They will be like, 'Ah! She's trying to dominate; she's trying to do this!'

Concerns about women's dominance in the South is best captured by a former women appointee in Enugu state, who said:

'Women's empowerment in the workplace is alien to our tradition. It's not our tradition, but when you go back to the tradition, you see that the women have been well-empowered. I guess you are not expecting to hear that but think about it.'

Here, the former appointee challenges the perception that women's empowerment in the workplace is incompatible with tradition. The suggestion is that if you delve into Nigeria's historical traditions, you might discover that women have held meaningful roles in the past, with a level of empowerment that has been overlooked or eroded over time.

Similar findings were revealed in the Northern regions, where the societal perception of women often aligns with the belief that women should not be in the public domain, and that if they are allowed to hold public roles, they should play a supportive rather than leadership role. This perspective is rooted in traditional gender roles in society, which suggest that women have a sphere of existence where they do not compete with men on an equal footing.

As a result, when opportunities arise to provide women with the same chances as men, there is a prevailing view that women might not be capable because they have no experience of public life. In Kano state, a female commissioner expressed her feelings on this, saying:

'They have already made it a point in their minds that women cannot perform, we just provide supportive roles ...Even though I am educated, I have all the experiences, they still have the feeling that women are being considered as providing a supporting role while men are considered to be in the driving seat because whenever an opportunity comes providing equal opportunity to women to compete with men, there is always this explanation that she cannot do it, she has many personal responsibilities, she would therefore use our resources and time for her own personal and social responsibilities'.

The prevailing viewpoint among some male opposers in the north about the role of women in the public domain, stems largely from this perception of their place in society. This societal norm tends to place women in a secondary position, emphasising their role in culture, community and the family rather than in the public sphere. According to an opposer of the female commissioner in Borno state:

'Women should be in a supportive role, because my religion denies women to participate in the leadership role. But for supportive activities my religion agrees that for women....I really support that and if they are given that role of support, I am sure they will perform better.'

Another challenge to women's leadership stems from the stereotype that women are more susceptible to manipulation. Regardless of their qualifications, experience of competence, this perception leads

to concerns about their ability to make independent decisions and resist external influence – as expected of political leaders. As one of the male opposers in Borno state said:

'Yes, women trust easily, and they can be easily manipulated.'

This stereotype suggests that women are perceived as more gullible or easily influenced than men, resulting in scepticism about their capacity to hold high-level positions.

Political networks and male support

In Northern Nigeria, women must work harder to establish their credibility than men. As a result, they need to rely on connections, referrals, and networks with men – reinforcing the stereotyped narratives around 'godfather' figures in national media. The former Commissioner in Kano state highlighted the need to align herself with politicians to gain acceptance because:

'Nobody knows me, you know. So, there was a lot of mistrust. I was asked to go and see this politician, go, and greet that politician just to make them feel that I am now a part of them.'

Her remarks emphasise the prevailing sentiment that, in the political landscape, establishing affiliations and paying respects to various politicians is seen as a way to integrate into the political fold and build trust.

Women's connections with influential politicians can have a major impact on their chances of being appointed. This was evident in the words of a supporter in Kano state, who said:

'For a former Commissioner, her appointment was a direct outcome of her prior collaboration with Governor. In a significant move, she was handpicked alongside two other women and four men.'

This illustrates the intricate interplay between connections, influence, and the elevation of women into key leadership roles. Similarly a woman appointee from Oyo state said:

'Some felt that some women do not deserve the position, that the positions were given to them because of what the authorities gained from them, especially based on male and female gender connections and relationships.'

Qualified women who lack such connections may well be at a disadvantage. Such connections and networks were not mentioned by study participants from the Southern states. This conspicuous silence might suggest that the role of political networks, though prominent in certain contexts, may not be a primary driving force behind leadership appointments across all corners of the nation.

If a woman appointed to a high-level position is a politician herself and her interests align with those of the political establishment, she may face fewer challenges and receive more support. Political alignments play a significant role in her acceptance into political office. The former commissioner in Borno state noted that:

'Women who are not politicians and are appointed to high-level positions face more challenges and potential sabotage. Their

appointment may be met with resistance, especially if their interests do not align with the political establishment'.

This underscores the difficulties women can face in leadership roles, especially when their appointment disrupts existing power dynamics or interests within the political landscape.

Some study participants in the Northern region argued that government sector appointments are influenced by federal policies, which may lead to the appointment of some women who may not be as qualified. As one male supporter in Kano state noted:

'In the public sector the appointment is being made on the federal character, so you see incompetent women being appointed.'

This highlights a complex challenge in balancing the objectives of ensuring regional representation and promoting gender equality in appointive positions within the public sector. It also has a potential impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of governance.

Family and marital dynamics

Family and marital dynamics present additional challenges for women leaders in both regions, as they must navigate societal expectations and traditional roles that often conflict with their leadership aspirations. In the North, societal norms dictate boundaries in personal interactions between men and women. A supporter of a former commissioner in Kano state reported that working practices in many political offices clash with women's gendered roles:

'For example, if it is not a working day, you can't just go to her house to discuss issues which are critical and vital. Sometimes it must be delayed until when you come back.'

Similarly, a male supporter from Borno State said:

'In this region of the country, religious beliefs and societal norms have an impact on how well women perform in leadership roles. This is because the culture discourages women from interacting with men, and if their position requires them to travel and interact with men outside of their immediate environment, this can be problematic, particularly for married women who may be accused of being unfaithful or wayward.'

In Southern Nigeria, women often find themselves in a tug-of-war between their domestic and leadership responsibilities. A supporter of a female leader in Oyo state said:

'Most of the time, the male folk are not comfortable working with women because of their frequent excuses to attend to the home front. For example, the children's upkeep and home maintenance.'

While geographically distinct, both regions grapple with the intertwined challenges stemming from the perceived clash between family and marital responsibilities and leadership expectations.

Responses to gender-based bias and its denial

The need for a systemic shift

In both Northern and Southern Nigeria, there is a clear need to support and empower women in leadership and to combat deeply entrenched gender norms. Respondents from northern regions emphasised the importance of advocacy and sensitising the public alongside reinforcing women's self-belief and capacity-building. In the Southern region, political will is seen as crucial for change, and comprehensive support is needed to address women's unique challenges. A supporter from Enugu state highlighted the need for political will:

'It's the political will that ensures a woman is appointed, or a man is appointed. The woman just has to show that she is willing and able to withstand the long hours and the pressure of the job.'

This suggests that the realignment of societal expectations requires systemic shifts, as well as individual efforts.

The importance of education

Study participants saw educational opportunities as a powerful countermeasure to combat the side-lining of women appointees in Northern Nigeria. A Commissioner from Borno state argued for the importance of education for women appointees based on her experience, saying:

'I also faced such opposition but because the governor at that time recognised my competency, capability, and strong educational background they couldn't side-line me. It was this type of ideology that contributed to me not being appointed as Commissioner of Education because they knew that if I was there then they cannot engage in misappropriation of funds. At that time, I held a Master's degree higher than that of the person that was later appointed into that position.'

In the Northern states of Borno and Kano, 88% of the interviewed women appointees said they have a post-graduate certificate (mostly a Masters or PhD), and the remaining 12% have a graduate degree. With low completion rates of tertiary education in the region, it is crucial to improve education opportunities to promote more women into high-level appointee positions within a context dominated by patriarchal norms.

Nigeria has made efforts to develop highly educated and capable technocrats. The National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), for example, was created to serve as the nation's premier policy think-tank and build a cadre of technocrats who would aid the country's development. However, since its creation in 1979 there has been minimal progress in increasing women's participation in the NIPSS Senior Executive Course (SEC), with women consistently comprising less than 20% of the programme's participants. In addition, only 16% of the 249 women who took part in the SEC between 1979 and 2023 conducted research on the issues and concerns of women and girls. This suggests that, even when women reach top bureaucratic positions in public appointive roles, they may not necessarily implement women-centred policies. Not surprisingly, no men studied issues that affect women and girls specifically (dRPC, 2023b).

Surprisingly, the discourse on the importance of educational opportunities was absent among study participants from the south. This notable silence raises questions. It could be that educational access and opportunities for women in the south are more established or less constrained by gender norms, which makes this topic less relevant. A male supporter in Oyo state was of the view that:

'Women get to the top or headship by the level of years spent in public office having had the requisite certificates. Apart from certificates, other yardsticks are just formal to move to the next grade.'

Alternatively, it could indicate that other critical issues overshadowed the conversation around educational access in the Southern region.

Denial and pushback in response to charges of gender bias

In the Southern region, there is a prevailing belief in the government's inclusivity and support for both men and women, with respondents contending that women, upon entering government structures, receive encouragement and encounter fewer barriers to their advancement. One male supporter in Enugu state denied gender bias, saying:

'I probably believe that in MDAs, there is no culture that prohibits women from fitting in. I don't think so. Nobody has ever complained about that.'

He suggested that, from his experience and understanding, no formal policy explicitly excludes women from participating in these government entities. However, the absence of explicit prohibition does not necessarily guarantee gender equality or equal opportunities for women within these organisations.

In contrast, women political appointees said they often faced unequal treatment compared to men, had been subjected to harassment, had been pressured to conform to male expectations, and had even witnessed corruption by their male superiors. Their assessments were influenced by the disposition of the person who evaluates their work, with gender sensitivity (or the lack of it) playing a crucial role in determining their success. Conservative beliefs about women's subordinate roles contributed to harsher assessments, further hindering their access to leadership positions. A female appointee in Oyo state recounted her experience, saying:

'If you're not ready to do their bidding, it becomes an issue – such a female can be sacked or can be transferred to a place they feel isn't conducive. We have all manner of harassment by male bosses, ranging from corruption trying to muscle a lady to, you know, ensure that they do their bidding, changing figures, sleeping with them and doing some not too healthy things ... and so that is also something that is working against women in the workplace.'

A female commissioner from Borno state said:

'Women face harsher assessment because their evaluators subscribe to conservative beliefs about the role of women as subordinates, hence they will go to any length to ensure women should not occupy leadership positions.'

Despite having equal performance indices, society places higher expectations on women solely because of their gender, making it difficult for them to thrive in their roles. Some of the women appointees expressed their feelings on this, including a female appointee from Akwa Ibom state, who said:

'When it comes to the performance index, it is the same for both men and women. However, despite having the same index for all, things are usually not balanced generally. The society expects more from the women for no other reason than because she is a woman.'

One female commissioner in Kano state put it simply, saying:

'I don't think we are judged according to performance, because if we were, we wouldn't be denied any post.'

In the Southern region, there is a perception of some level of societal acceptance of the imperfections of men in leadership roles. As a result, a man who makes a mistake may be treated more leniently for a woman in a similar role. As a male opposer from Akwa Ibom state said:

'Generally, society has a soft spot for men. They might tolerate certain things from a man, but it might not be tolerated from a woman.'

The public sector versus private and non-governmental spaces

Some study participants in the Southern states raised concerns about a pro-male bias in public sector leadership, suggesting that decision-makers often prefer males in leadership roles. They also called for proactive measures to enhance gender diversity, particularly in board positions where female representation can ensure more equitable representation.

The private sector and the non-governmental space are both perceived as meritocratic by respondents in both regions. In the North, women who held public appointive office expressed admiration for the leadership roles held by competent women in civil society. They singled out the qualifications, skills and abilities of the women working for social advancement.

In the South, respondents expressed their satisfaction about the experiences of women in the private sector. They cited examples of women entering traditionally male-dominated private sector occupations, indicating a potential shift in attitudes and more opportunities for women across sectors, as one female appointee from Enugu state explained:

'You see girls who are security officers. And you know, not like in the Police Force, but private security outfits. Before you will never have seen such.'

In terms of gender representation across the public, non-profit and private for-profit sectors, respondents in both the Northern and Southern regions concluded that the public sector offers less opportunities for inclusion than the non-profit and private sectors.

Conclusion

This study reveals a stark contrast between the media portrayal of women and men in appointive positions as a result of unequal gender norms, roles and stereotypes, which are also reflected in the experiences of women appointees at the state level. Norms-influenced reporting means that women's stories are often sensationalised and tend to focus on their competence and qualifications. Women also face character attacks, ranging from their leadership style to moral integrity.

Stories about men, however, focus on the facts. While women are much more likely to be described as '*scandalous*', '*incompetent*', and '*corrupt*' in media coverage, softer terminology is more likely to be used in stories about men, such as '*mismanaged*', '*misappropriated*' or '*investigated*'. Men are also less likely to be described as incompetent. As well as differences in the lexicon, there are also biases in scope, leading to the over-representation of men's voice. This biased media representation has significant consequences for women's visibility and agency in Nigerian public office and underscores the need to address these imbalances.

This study's findings also emphasise the complex interplay between traditional gender norms, policy-making, and societal change in women's participation in appointive positions in both Northern and Southern Nigeria. Both regions disregard women's capacities to lead as a result of their perceived submissiveness and overly trusting nature. Education is a key resource for women, though it does not feature equally in discourses in northern and southern states. There are, several other key regional contrasts such as the role of political networks, which varies between the North and the South. This highlights the complexity of addressing gender disparities and the need for context-specific approaches.

Recommendations

It is imperative to address the challenges facing women in appointive positions through a comprehensive approach. Such an approach includes key areas such as media portrayal, training, political intervention, and research initiatives. A focus on these four aspects would enable a more equitable and informed decision-making process and improve the overall representation and treatment of all appointees, regardless of their gender.

Transforming gender norms in media coverage

The government should consider the following:

- Mainstream gender analysis and methodologies into the training curriculum of university communication programmes and roll out in-service training programmes on gender responsiveness in reporting for serving media professionals.
- Leverage current national concern on fake news to introduce educational initiatives in media literacy that will empower the public to deconstruct and recognise gender biases in media reporting.
- Support self-regulatory media platforms to produce gender-sensitive reporting, set standards and hold members to account.

Development partners should consider the following:

- Support the establishment of women's leadership development capacity-strengthening centres, programmes and networks that target middle-level women leadership poised for career progression in public appointive positions.
- Support women already engaged in public appointive positions through mentorship and negotiation skills building. This study's findings show that women in public appointive positions are skilled at negotiation, work towards success and are often inclusive. Such skills can be developed and strengthened.
- Extend non-material incentives to initiatives that aim to enhance gender-sensitive reporting. This could involve funding for training programmes tailored for journalists and media organisations.
- Fund research projects on media reporting trends pertaining to women in leadership.
- Establish a dedicated media watchdog with a focus on gender equality in media reporting. Such an organisation could provide consistent assessment and feedback to ensure the more equitable representation of women.

Media/press councils and professional bodies should consider the following:

- Lead the development and implementation of comprehensive reporting guidelines, accompanied by regular training sessions for journalists and editors. This would include seeking out and featuring more women experts, commentators and analysts, as well as spotlighting women in leadership roles, their achievements, and the challenges they overcome.
- Acknowledge and celebrate outstanding journalism and media outlets that consistently uphold gender-sensitive reporting through peer awards and accolades. This will further motivate the adoption of these principles across the industry.

Transforming gender norms through government training institutions

Government training institutions are well positioned to play a pivotal role in shaping the attitudes and behaviours of public servants, particularly the men who appoint, work with, and assess the performance of women in public appointive positions. These institutions can transform gender norms by acting on the following recommendations.

- Promote gender awareness among public servants by incorporating gender-equality modules into training programmes, enabling public servants to recognise and challenge stereotypes and biases.
- Prioritise the empowerment of women leaders by offering specialised leadership and management programmes for women in appointive and career positions. These programmes should equip women with the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to excel in their roles and challenge traditional gender roles within the workplace.
- Lead by example and implement gender-responsive policies within their own structures by, for example, ensuring equal opportunities, addressing workplace harassment, and actively promoting diversity and inclusion.

- Conduct research on gender disparities within the public sector and advocate for policy changes in areas where gender norms are most entrenched, identifying opportunities for reform.
- Engage with feminists and women-led civil society organisations by convening dialogues, seminars, and workshops on gender equality.
- Establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate their own efforts in promoting gender equality to track progress, identify areas that require improvement and ensure gender equality remains a priority in their programmes.

Other approaches to shift gender norm in appointive positions

The following are critical approaches that would help to shift gender norms in appointive positions.

- **Political parties** have a critical role to play in increasing the representation of women in elective positions, as the presence of more women in the legislative domain will create a demonstration effect with implications for their appointive positions.
- **Religious leaders** can actively promote gender-inclusive interpretations of religious teachings that emphasise the equal value and potential of men and women. By using religious scriptures to support women's participation in leadership roles, religious leaders can influence their congregations to challenge traditional norms and embrace gender equality. Civil society organisations should facilitate interfaith dialogues that bring together religious leaders from different faiths to discuss gender equality within a religious context.
- **Government at all levels** should implement and enforce gender quotas for appointive positions, following the example set by Kwara State's affirmative action law. These quotas would provide immediate opportunities for women to assume decision-making roles. Leading by example through the appointment of women to influential positions at the highest levels of government would send a clear message about the significance of gender balance in leadership.
- **Policymakers** should prioritise increased access to quality education for girls and women particularly in rural and marginalised areas. This involves greater investment in school infrastructure, the provision of scholarships, and the implementation of initiatives that encourage girls' enrolment and retention in schools, as well as a gender-responsive curriculum and the engagement of parents and communities through awareness campaigns.

Areas for further research

Further research is required to assess the long-term impact and effectiveness of policies and interventions that aim to shift gender norms and promote women's participation in leadership roles. This research should cover the following areas.

- The extent to which public sector training institutions engage and respond to the negative impact of gender norms on women in senior appointive positions.
- The impact of intersecting identities and systems of oppression, such as age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, on women's experiences in appointive positions.
- Media coverage of women in appointive positions over time, aiming to track changes in portrayal and identify any shifts in public perception.

- The interaction between interventions that aim to shift gender norms in the elective domain and others with the same objective that focus on the appointive domain.
- Comparative studies across more regions within Nigeria, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of regional variations in gender norms and their impact.
- The potential to replicate the success story of Kwara State's Affirmative Action Law, with in-depth field research on its implementation.

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ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on harmful gender norms.

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Cover image

Women of the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS), Nigeria, during the African Women's Conference, 2021. The NCWS is the umbrella Nigerian women's civil society organization with offices in every state and local government areas in Nigeria. NCWS advocates for women's representation, rights, empowerment and gender justice. © dRPC.

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