journals.unizik.edu.ng/jcpl/index ISSN: 2736-0342
NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA
JOURNAL OF COMMERCIAL AND PROPERTY LAW Vol. 12(3), July, 2025

THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION AT 30: MARKING PROGRESS AND ADDRESSING CHALLENGES IN PURSUIT OF GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted in 1995, marked a significant milestone in the global pursuit of gender equality and women's empowerment. Over the past 30 years, Nigeria has made notable progress in advancing women's rights through legal reforms, policy interventions, and increased advocacy efforts. However, persistent challenges continue to undermine these gains, particularly in areas such as political participation, economic empowerment, access to education, and protection against gender-based violence. This study critically assesses the progress and challenges in the implementation of women's rights in Nigeria since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration. Employing a doctrinal research methodology, the study analyzes relevant legal instruments, policy frameworks, and case law to evaluate the extent to which Nigeria has met its obligations under the Beijing Platform for Action. The study highlights the role of international conventions, constitutional provisions, and domestic laws in shaping gender rights in Nigeria while identifying socio-cultural and institutional barriers that hinder full gender equality. Findings reveal that despite the enactment of gender-focused legislation, enforcement gaps, societal resistance, and political marginalization continue to impede progress. The study recommends strengthened legal enforcement, enhanced political will, public sensitization, and strategic policy reforms to bridge the gender gap and achieve sustainable women's empowerment. Conclusively, while strides have been made, achieving the full realization of women's rights in Nigeria requires a concerted effort from government institutions, civil society, and the international community.

Keywords: Beijing platform for action, marking progress, addressing challenges, gender equality, women empowerment, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

The struggle for gender equality and women's rights in Nigeria has been shaped by both global and domestic legal, political, and socio-economic developments. One of the most significant milestones in the global women's rights movement was the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), which set out a comprehensive roadmap for achieving gender equality in critical areas such as education, health, political participation, economic empowerment, and legal rights. As Nigeria is committed to implementing this framework, the past three decades have witnessed notable progress in advancing women's rights through legislative reforms, policy initiatives, and advocacy efforts.[1]

Despite these strides, numerous structural, cultural, and institutional challenges persist, hindering full gender equality in Nigeria. Women continue to face barriers such as discriminatory laws, gender-based violence, political underrepresentation, economic disparity, and limited access to justice.[2] While Nigeria has ratified international treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the domestication and enforcement of these legal

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[1] I Mojisola Eseyin, 'Women's Right Protection Globalisation or Localisation' (2011) 132 (2) *International Journal of Advanced Legal Studies and Governance*.
[2] Ibid.

instruments remain inconsistent. The intersection of customary and religious practices further complicates efforts to achieve gender parity.[3]

This paper provides a 30-year review of women's rights in Nigeria since the Beijing Declaration, assessing both the progress made and the persisting challenges. It critically examines the impact of legal frameworks, policy measures, and socio-economic changes on women's rights while identifying gaps that need urgent attention. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to ongoing discourse on gender equality and propose actionable recommendations for ensuring a more inclusive and just society for Nigerian women.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

This is a United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995. A global agenda for achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. The conference was indeed a defining moment of our time and the message of the conference is that women's issues are global and universal. As noted in the mission statement, the platform for Action is an agenda for women empowerment. It aims at accelerating the implementation of the Nairobi forward looking strategies for advancement of women and removing all obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making.[4]

The platform of Action identified twelve critical areas of concerns for women globally and agreed on strategic objectives and action for addressing all. These include: women and poverty; education and training of women; women and health; violence against women; women and armed conflict; women and the economy; women in power and decision-making; institutional mechanisms for advancement of women; human rights of women; women and the media; women and the environment; and the girl-child. The Beijing Conference was indeed, a milestone in the advancement of women's rights and the world has not been the same since the conference. Today, in Nigeria, even judges, without prompting, suo moto, have made references to Beijing. In the landmark case of *Mojekwu v Mojekwu*[5], Justice Niki Tobi (justice of the Supreme Court Nigeria) then of the court of Appeal, Enugu division, held in favour of a woman's right to inherit land under customary law that: "We need not travel to Beijing to know that some of our customs, including the Nnewi "Oli-ekpe" custom relied upon by the appellant are not consistent with our civilized world which we all live today".[6]

In the same vein, Honourable Justice J. C. N. Ugwu, the then Chief Judge of Enugu State, in a suit filed by *Joy Ezeilo and 9ors. v The Government of Enugu State of Nigeria and 2ors.*[7] To compel the Enugu State government to appoint women into its State Executive Council referred to in the argument and submissions of the learned counsel, Joy Ezeilo, as "presented with feminine touch and Beijing tradition". In other words, Beijing has come to be known as representing women's struggle for rights and equally of opportunities.[8] At least, the 30 percent demand for representation of women in elective and appointive position become popularized from the Beijing Conference, its Declaration and Platform for Action.[9]

2.2 Gender Equality

Gender equality is the belief that all genders should receive equal treatment and opportunities in society. It encompasses various dimensions, including political, economic, social, cultural, and educational aspects.

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[3] Ibid.
[4] B Boutrous-Ghali, 'Translating the momentum of Beijing into Action" in Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration (New York, United Nation Publication, 1996) p. 2.
[5] [1997] 7NWhR (Pt. 336), p.60.
[6] JN Ezeilo, *Women, Law and Human Rights: Global and National Perspectives* (Enugu, Acenes Publishers, 2011) p. 105.
[7] Unreported Suit No. E/240/99
[8] J Ezeilo Ibid
[9] Previously the Economic and Social Council had endorsed a target of having 30 percent women in position at decision making levels in 1995. However, Beijing concretize the demand by including it as part of its strategic objectives and actions.

Gender equality means that individuals of all genders can enjoy the same rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. It's not about making everyone the same but recognizing and valuing differences.[10] Achieving gender equality is crucial for the development of society. It leads to improved economic growth, greater social cohesion, and better health outcomes. When everyone can participate fully, societies thrive.

Traditionally, many societies have placed men in dominant roles, leading to systemized inequalities. Women, non-binary people, and gender minorities have faced discrimination in various forms, including voting rights, pay gaps, and access to education.

Gender equally focuses on addressing the following:
Education: Ensuring that everyone has access to education, irrespective of gender, helps in breaking the cycle of poverty and empowers individuals.
Economic Participation: Equal pay for equal work is a significant aspect. Addressing wage gaps and promoting women's participation in leadership roles are crucial steps.
Political Representation: Encouraging equal participation in political spheres ensures that diverse voices are heard in decision-making processes.
Health Rights: Access to healthcare services and reproductive rights is vital in ensuring that everyone can make informed choices about their bodies.[11]

2.3 Women Empowerment

Women empowerment refers to the process of increasing the social, economic, political, and educational strength of women. It emphasizes the ability of women to make choices and take control of their lives. Women empowerment is about giving women the autonomy to make decisions and assert their rights, leading to greater participation and influence in various spheres of life. Empowering women leads to numerous societal benefits, including economic growth, improved health and education outcomes, and the promotion of more stable and democratic societies.[12]

Women empowerment encompasses various interconnected dimensions aimed at ensuring equal rights, opportunities, and dignity for women in all aspects of life. Economic empowerment involves equipping women with the skills, resources, and opportunities needed to fully participate in the workforce. This includes ensuring equal pay and job opportunities across sectors, as well as supporting women entrepreneurs through access to finance, mentorship, and business development services. Social empowerment focuses on improving the overall well-being and societal standing of women by enhancing their access to quality healthcare and education, and by addressing issues such as gender-based violence and discrimination, which hinder their full participation in society. Political empowerment encourages women to take active roles in political processes by promoting their representation in leadership and decision-making positions, and by supporting laws and policies that uphold gender equality. Finally, educational empowerment is crucial for enabling women to develop critical skills and knowledge. This involves ensuring that girls have equal access to education, especially in regions where cultural norms act as barriers, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities that allow women to grow and thrive throughout their lives. Together, these pillars create a foundation for a more just, inclusive, and equitable society.

3. Progress in Women's Rights in Nigeria (1995–2025)

Since Nigeria's commitment to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, significant progress has been made in advancing women's rights across legal, political, educational, economic, and health sectors. These gains reflect the efforts of policymakers, civil society organizations, and

[10] WP Statsky, Family Law: The Essentials (New York: Delmar Cengage Learning, 2004) 187.
[11] Ibid.
[12] A Walsh & C Hemmens, *Law, Justice, and Society. A Sociolegal Introduction* (2nd edn, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 2011) 320.

international bodies in addressing gender disparities and promoting women's empowerment.[13] However, while important strides have been taken, challenges remain in ensuring full and equitable participation of women in all spheres of society.[14]

3.1 Legal and Policy Reforms

One of the most critical areas of progress has been in the legal and policy landscape. Nigeria has ratified key international treaties aimed at protecting and promoting women's rights, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. However, while these treaties signify the country's commitment to gender equality, the process of domesticating and implementing them has been slow and inconsistent.[15] On the legislative front, the passage of gender-sensitive laws such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) 2015 has played a crucial role in addressing gender-based violence and harmful practices like domestic abuse, sexual violence, and female genital mutilation. Similarly, efforts to pass the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill (GEO Bill) have sparked national discussions on women's rights, though resistance from conservative groups has delayed its enactment. Other policy interventions, such as the National Gender Policy (2006, revised in 2021), have aimed to promote women's empowerment, but challenges in enforcement persist.

3.2 Political Representation and Participation

Over the past three decades, Nigerian women have made notable progress in political participation, with more women contesting and holding elective and appointive positions. Women have served in high-ranking roles, including ministers, governors, and legislators, reflecting a gradual shift toward gender inclusivity in governance. However, representation remains disproportionately low, with women holding less than 10% of elected positions at both federal and state levels.[16]

Structural and societal barriers continue to hinder women's full participation in politics. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, political violence, lack of financial support, and discrimination within political parties make it difficult for women to compete on an equal footing with their male counterparts. Despite advocacy for affirmative action, the proposed 35% gender quota for women in political offices has yet to be fully implemented, leaving a significant gap in gender representation in leadership.[17]

3.3 Education and Economic Empowerment

Education has been a powerful tool in advancing women's rights in Nigeria. Over the past three decades, there has been a steady increase in female literacy rates and school enrollment, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. Government initiatives, such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Program, have helped bridge the gender gap in education, ensuring that more girls have access to schooling. However, dropout rates among girls remain high, particularly in Northern Nigeria, due to cultural and economic barriers such as early marriage, poverty, and societal expectations that prioritize male education.[18]

Women's participation in the economy has also expanded, with more women engaging in entrepreneurship, trade, and the formal workforce. Policies aimed at financial inclusion and business support for women, such as the Bank of Industry's Gender-Based Funds and Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) Development Initiatives, have helped women establish and grow businesses.[19] Nevertheless, economic disparities persist, with women facing limited access to credit, wage gaps, and

[13] UN Women, *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Beijing +5 Political Declaration and Outcome,* (New York, 2015). http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/01/beijing-declaration.com accessed 15 March, 2025
[14] Ibid
[15] Ibid
[16] E Ekhator, 'Protecting and Promoting Women's Rights in Nigeria: Constraints and Prospects' <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334480675_Protecting_and_Promoting_Women%27s_Rights_in_Nigeria_Constraints_and_Prospects> accessed 14 March 2025.
[17] Ibid
[18] Ibid
[19] Ibid

discrimination in employment opportunities. The informal sector, where many women operate, remains largely unregulated, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and financial insecurity.

3.4 Health and Reproductive Rights

Progress in women's health and reproductive rights has been mixed. On one hand, Nigeria has made strides in maternal health care, with improved access to prenatal and postnatal services, family planning, and reproductive health education. The establishment of the National Health Insurance Authority (NHIA) Act, 2022, which seeks to expand healthcare access, is a step in the right direction for improving women's health outcomes.[20]

However, maternal mortality remains alarmingly high, with Nigeria accounting for nearly 20% of global maternal deaths. Limited access to quality healthcare, especially in rural areas, poor funding of the health sector, and socio-cultural factors that discourage women from seeking medical care contribute to this challenge. Additionally, issues such as unsafe abortions, gender-based violence, and inadequate sexual and reproductive health education continue to threaten women's well-being.[21]

While these advancements highlight Nigeria's progress in promoting women's rights, there is still much work to be done. Legal reforms need stronger enforcement, political participation requires more inclusive policies, economic barriers must be dismantled, and health challenges demand greater attention. As Nigeria marks 30 years since the Beijing Declaration, it is crucial to build on these achievements and address the persistent challenges that hinder women's full empowerment and equality.[22]

4. Nigerian Laws, Regional Frameworks, and International Treaties Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

4.1 Nigerian Laws

Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999): Section 42 Prohibits discrimination on the grounds of gender, ensuring individuals are treated equally before the law. Section 17(3) Promotes equality of rights between men and women.
National Gender Policy (2006): A strategic framework aimed at mainstreaming gender into all sectors and policies in Nigeria, promoting women's rights, empowerment, and participation in governance.
Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015): A comprehensive law aimed at eliminating violence against individuals, particularly women, encompassing domestic violence, sexual assault, and harmful traditional practices.
The Child Rights Act (2003): Protects the rights of children, including girls, ensuring access to education, freedom from discrimination, and protection from abuse.
Maternity Leave Act: Provides for maternity leave entitlements, allowing women to take leave for childbirth while protecting their job security.
The Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (2019): Aims to eliminate gender discrimination in the workforce and mandates equal pay for equal work.
The Prohibition of Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (2018): While focusing on persons with disabilities, it also includes provisions that address gender disparities faced by women with disabilities.

4.2 Regional Laws and Frameworks:

African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1986): Article 18 mandates state parties to eliminate discrimination against women and ensures the protection of women's rights.

[20] MA Kana, 'Maternal and Child health interventions in Nigeria' <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct= j&opi =89978449&url=https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-015-1688-3&ved=2ahUKEwiyiceqx 5OMAxXLSkEAHQX2AzkQFnoECEAQAQ&usg=AOvVaw2BLk5I2s16MtNUBWskXf-B> accessed 14th March, 2025
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid

Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol, 2003): This protocol addresses various forms of discrimination against women and mandates member states to take specific actions to promote women's rights.
Regional Economic Communities (e.g., ECOWAS): ECOWAS Policy for Gender Equality: Aims to ensure equal rights for men and women, promoting their participation in governance and peace processes.
SADC Protocol on Gender and Development: Though not specifically for Nigeria, it's significant in the broader Southern African context, mandating gender equality in various spheres.

4.3 International Frameworks:
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): Nigeria ratified CEDAW, committing to take all necessary measures to end discrimination against women and promote gender equality.
Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Goal 5 focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Nigeria is committed to these goals, driving initiatives for women's empowerment.
UN Security Council Resolution 1325: Emphasizes the role of women in peace and security discussions, prompting Nigeria to include women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes.
Universal Declaration of Human Rights: While not legally binding, it sets out fundamental human rights, including equality without discrimination, influencing many national laws, including those in Nigeria.

Nigerian laws, alongside regional and international frameworks, provide a robust structure promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. However, implementation and enforcement of these laws remain critical challenges.

5. Persisting Challenges to Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Nigeria

Despite the progress made over the past three decades in advancing women's rights to gender equality in Nigeria, significant challenges persist. These obstacles are deeply rooted in legal, institutional, cultural, and societal structures, making it difficult for women to achieve full equality. While legislative and policy reforms have created a framework for gender equality, their implementation and enforcement remain weak, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to limit women's rights in various spheres.[23]

5.1 Legal and Intuitional Barriers

One of the major challenges is the incomplete domestication and enforcement of gender-related laws. Nigeria has ratified key international agreements such as CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol, both of which seek to eliminate discrimination against women. However, the country has failed to fully domesticate and enforce these treaties, leaving women without the full legal protection they are entitled to.[24] Even where gender-sensitive laws exist, such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) and the Child Rights Act, their enforcement is inconsistent, particularly at the state and local government levels. Many states in Nigeria, particularly in the northern and conservative regions, have refused to adopt these progressive laws, citing cultural and religious reasons. This lack of uniformity in legal implementation leaves many women vulnerable to discrimination, violence, and economic disempowerment.

Resistance to gender-sensitive policies is another persistent issue. Efforts to pass the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill (GEO Bill), which aims to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women in political, economic, and social spheres, have faced repeated opposition. Some legislators and interest groups argue that the bill contradicts religious and cultural values, preventing it from becoming law. Similarly, attempts to introduce affirmative action policies, such as the proposed 35% quota for women's

[23] A Ewang 'Nigeria Risk Falling further Behind on Women's Equity' https://www.hrw.org/new/2022/03/08/Nigeria-Risks-Falling-further-Behind-Women's-Equity/ >accessed 11 March 2025.
[24] Ibid

representation in politics, have been met with resistance from male-dominated political structures. This continued pushback against progressive gender policies reinforces the structural inequalities that hinder women's advancement.[25]

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most pervasive violations of women's rights in Nigeria. Domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, and harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) continue to threaten the safety and dignity of women. According to reports, one in three Nigerian women has experienced physical or sexual violence in her lifetime, yet many cases go unreported due to stigma, fear, and lack of trust in the justice system. Survivors of GBV often face victim-blaming, and law enforcement agencies frequently fail to treat such cases with urgency and seriousness.[26]

Access to justice for victims of GBV is another major concern. While laws such as the VAPP Act and the Child Rights Act criminalize various forms of violence against women, implementation remains weak, and perpetrators often go unpunished. The legal process for reporting and prosecuting GBV cases is slow, expensive, and emotionally draining, discouraging many women from seeking justice. Moreover, in many rural areas, customary and religious dispute resolution mechanisms take precedence over formal legal channels. These informal systems often prioritize family reputation and reconciliation over justice, leading to forced settlements that fail to hold perpetrators accountable.[27]

Another barrier to justice is the lack of gender-sensitive law enforcement and judicial mechanisms. Many police officers and judicial officials lack the training to handle GBV cases with sensitivity, leading to mishandling, delays, and in some cases, dismissal of cases altogether. Victims who do come forward are often met with indifference or outright hostility, further discouraging them from pursuing legal action. The absence of adequate shelters, legal aid, and psychological support services further exacerbates the plight of GBV survivors, leaving many with no choice but to remain in abusive situations.[28]

Beyond legal and institutional barriers, deep-seated socio-cultural norms continue to limit women's rights and freedoms. In many communities, traditional gender roles dictate that women should remain submissive to male authority, restricting their ability to make decisions about their own lives, education, and careers. Practices such as forced and early marriage deprive many girls of education and economic opportunities, trapping them in cycles of dependency and poverty. Religious interpretations that reinforce male dominance and female subjugation also contribute to resistance against gender equality initiatives, making it difficult to challenge discriminatory practices.[29]

The persistence of these challenges highlights the gap between policy and practice in Nigeria's efforts to advance women's rights. While there have been legal reforms and increased awareness about gender issues, cultural resistance, institutional inefficiencies, and weak enforcement mechanisms continue to undermine progress. Addressing these challenges requires stronger political will, legal enforcement, grassroots advocacy, and societal mindset shifts to ensure that women in Nigeria can fully enjoy their rights and freedoms. Only by dismantling these barriers can the country achieve meaningful gender equality and social justice for all women.[30]

5.2 Socio-Cultural and Religious Constraints

One of the most significant barriers to women's rights in Nigeria is the deeply ingrained patriarchal culture that continues to shape societal expectations and gender roles. In many parts of the country,

[25] National Human Rights Commission, 'The Rights of Women and Gender related matters', available online at <https://Nigeriarights.gov.ng/focus-areas/women-and-gender-matters.html> accessed 11 March 2025
[26] Ibid
[27] Ibid
[28] N C Gbane, 'Nigerian Girls Adopted by Boko Haram Honored in Exhibition' <https://www.africanews.nigerian-girls-abducted-by-boko-haram-honored-in-exhibition/> accessed on 11 March 2025
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid

women are still viewed primarily as homemakers and caregivers, with limited opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, whether at home, in the workplace, or in politics. The belief that men should hold positions of authority while women remain subordinate has led to widespread resistance to gender equality initiatives, even in the face of legal and policy reforms.[31]

This resistance is particularly strong in communities where traditional and religious beliefs play a dominant role in shaping laws and social norms. Customary and religious laws often take precedence over statutory provisions, especially in issues related to marriage, inheritance, and family life.[32] For instance, in many northern states governed by Sharia law, certain legal protections available to women under Nigerian statutory law are either ignored or selectively applied.[33] Similarly, in several communities governed by customary law, women are often denied the right to inherit property or make independent financial decisions, reinforcing economic dependency on male relatives.

Harmful cultural practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and widowhood rites continue to undermine women's autonomy and well-being. Despite national and international legal frameworks prohibiting these practices, they remain prevalent due to strong cultural justifications and weak enforcement mechanisms. Many families, particularly in rural areas, still arrange early marriages for their daughters, believing that it ensures their security and upholds family honor. These practices not only violate women's rights but also limit their access to education, economic opportunities, and personal freedom.

Religious institutions also play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward gender equality. In many cases, religious leaders wield considerable influence over political and social affairs, and their interpretations of religious texts often reinforce male dominance and female submission.[34] Some religious groups actively oppose gender equality policies, claiming they contradict religious teachings. As a result, efforts to reform laws on gender-based violence, political representation, and equal opportunities frequently encounter resistance from powerful religious and cultural leaders.

Changing these deep-seated norms requires a multi-faceted approach that involves not only legal reforms but also public education, advocacy, and engagement with religious and traditional leaders. While some progress has been made in challenging these norms through women-led advocacy groups and civil society organizations, the pace of change remains slow. Until these cultural and religious barriers are systematically addressed, legal advancements alone will not be sufficient to guarantee women's full participation in Nigerian society.

5.3 Economic Disparities and Financial Exclusion

Women in Nigeria continue to face significant economic disparities and financial exclusion, limiting their ability to achieve financial independence and economic stability. Despite the growing number of women in the workforce, they remain concentrated in lower-paying jobs, with limited access to leadership positions and high-income professions.[35] The gender wage gap is a persistent issue, with women earning significantly less than their male counterparts for the same work. Discrimination in hiring, promotion, and workplace policies also restricts women's career advancement, making it harder for them to break into male-dominated industries such as finance, engineering, and technology.[36]

Beyond workplace discrimination, women also face barriers to financial resources and business opportunities.[37] Many Nigerian women, particularly those in rural areas, lack access to credit, land ownership, and financial services, making it difficult for them to establish and grow businesses.

[31] E O Ekhator "Women and the Law in Nigeria: A Reappraisal" *Journal of International Women's Studies*. 2015 16 (3) P. 285
[32] Ibid
[33] Ibid
[34] Ephesians 5:22-24, Colossians 3:18, 1Peter 3:1-2
[35] O Oyelade 'Women's Rights in Africa: A Myth or Reality' [2006] 9 (1) *University of Benin Journal*, 100.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

Traditional inheritance practices often deny women the right to inherit land and property, leaving them without collateral to secure bank loans. As a result, women-owned businesses are often underfunded and struggle to expand, despite the fact that women make up a significant portion of Nigeria's informal economy and entrepreneurial sector.

The financial exclusion of women is further exacerbated by limited access to formal banking and investment opportunities. Many women, especially those in rural and low-income communities, do not have bank accounts or access to financial literacy programs. This limits their ability to save, invest, and build wealth, keeping them in a cycle of economic vulnerability.[38] While several initiatives, such as the Bank of Industry's Women's Fund and microfinance programs, have been introduced to support women entrepreneurs, these efforts are often not far-reaching enough to bridge the gap. Many of these programs also face issues of inadequate funding, bureaucratic challenges, and lack of awareness, preventing women from fully benefiting from them.

Women's underrepresentation in key economic sectors also reflects broader systemic inequalities. Industries such as oil and gas, construction, and manufacturing, which drive Nigeria's economy, remain male-dominated, with very few women in leadership or technical roles. The absence of policies that actively promote female inclusion in these industries further marginalizes women, restricting their ability to contribute meaningfully to national economic growth. Additionally, many women who do work in these sectors face discrimination, harassment, and lack of career development opportunities, further limiting their advancement.[39]

To address these economic disparities, there is a need for stronger policy interventions, financial inclusion strategies, and targeted empowerment programs that provide women with the skills, resources, and opportunities to succeed. Expanding access to credit, enforcing equal pay policies, and increasing representation of women in leadership roles are critical steps toward achieving economic gender equality. Equally important is the role of corporate and government institutions in actively promoting diversity and inclusion in the workforce through affirmative action policies and mentorship programs for women.[40]

Without deliberate efforts to close the economic gender gap, Nigerian women will continue to face financial instability and limited economic independence, making it harder for them to challenge socio-cultural constraints and fully participate in society. Economic empowerment is not just about increasing women's income—it is about ensuring that they have the financial security, autonomy, and decision-making power to shape their own lives and futures.[41]

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

Thirty years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Nigeria has made notable strides in advancing women's rights, but persistent challenges continue to hinder full gender equality. Legal reforms, increased political participation, improvements in education, and economic opportunities have paved the way for progress, yet structural, cultural, and institutional barriers still prevent women from fully enjoying their rights. Gender-based violence, economic exclusion, political underrepresentation, and socio-cultural resistance remain significant obstacles that demand urgent and sustained action.

The journey towards gender equality in Nigeria is a continuous process that requires commitment from all sectors of society. While the government has introduced policies and laws to promote women's rights, implementation and enforcement remain inconsistent. Furthermore, deep-rooted patriarchal norms,

[38] B Ibhawoh, *Between Culture and Constitution: The Cultural Legitimacy of Human Rights in Nigeria*. (Danish Centre for Human Rights, Studiestraede 38, 1999) P. 45
[39] Ibid
[40] Ibid
[41] Ibid

religious influences, and economic inequalities continue to slow progress. Achieving meaningful change will require a multi-stakeholder approach, involving government, civil society, private sector actors, religious and traditional leaders, and local communities. Only through collective and sustained efforts can Nigeria move towards a more inclusive and equitable society where women's rights are fully recognized and protected.

6.2 Recommendations

To address the persisting challenges and accelerate progress in **s**trengthening gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen Legal and Policy Implementation: While Nigeria has ratified key international agreements, full domestication and enforcement of these commitments remain weak. The government must fast-track the domestication of CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol, ensuring their provisions are effectively integrated into national law. Additionally, the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill (GEO Bill) should be passed to provide a comprehensive legal framework for gender equality. Law enforcement agencies and judicial bodies must be adequately trained and resourced to ensure strict enforcement of laws protecting women's rights.

Enhance Women's Political Representation and Leadership: Women's underrepresentation in governance continues to be a barrier to gender equality. To address this, the adoption of gender quotas should be prioritized to ensure that more women are represented in political offices and decision-making positions. Political parties should be mandated to field more female candidates, while financial and institutional support should be provided to empower women to participate in politics. Civic education campaigns should be intensified to challenge discriminatory norms that discourage women from running for office.

Expand Access to Education and Economic Opportunities: Efforts must be intensified to close the gender gap in education, particularly in rural areas where child marriage and cultural norms limit girls' school attendance. Government policies should focus on providing free and compulsory education for girls, addressing barriers such as poverty, gender-based violence in schools, and lack of infrastructure. Economic empowerment initiatives should prioritize equal employment opportunities, fair wages, and access to financial resources for women. Microfinance schemes, skill development programs, and entrepreneurship support should be expanded to enable women to achieve financial independence. The government and private sector should also enforce equal pay laws and workplace protections against discrimination and harassment.

Strengthen Efforts to Combat Gender-Based Violence (GBV): Although legal provisions exist to criminalize GBV, enforcement remains inadequate. Community-based interventions, legal aid services, and survivor support programs should be expanded to provide effective protection and justice for victims. Law enforcement agencies should establish specialized GBV response units, and safe shelters, psychological support, and rehabilitation programs should be made widely accessible. Additionally, public awareness campaigns should be intensified to challenge the culture of silence and impunity surrounding gender-based violence.

Address Socio-Cultural and Religious Barriers: Engaging religious and traditional leaders as advocates for women's rights is crucial to overcoming resistance to gender equality. Dialogue and sensitization programs should be initiated to challenge harmful cultural practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and discriminatory inheritance laws. Efforts should be made to promote progressive interpretations of religious texts that align with human rights and gender justice.

Improve Women's Access to Healthcare and Reproductive Rights: Healthcare services, particularly maternal and reproductive health programs, should be expanded to ensure women have access to quality and affordable care. Family planning services should be widely accessible, and policies should be put in place to address maternal mortality and gender-based health disparities. Investments in healthcare infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, are critical to ensuring that all women receive the medical attention they need.

Increase Public Awareness and Gender Advocacy: Public education campaigns should be intensified to challenge stereotypes, debunk myths, and promote gender equality. Media, schools, and community organizations should play a key role in changing negative attitudes towards women's rights and participation in society. National programs should also be introduced to encourage men and boys to become allies in the fight for gender equality, fostering a culture of respect and inclusion.