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NIGERIAN WOMEN AND THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: A FOCUS ON GENDER DIPLOMACY

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Abstract

This study critically examines the involvement of Nigerian women in international relations, with a particular focus on gender diplomacy as a transformative framework for achieving inclusive foreign policy outcomes. Despite Nigeria's prominent role in regional and global diplomacy, women remain significantly underrepresented in the country's diplomatic corps and high-level foreign policy decision-making. Drawing on Feminist International Relations Theory and Constructivism, this research explores the historical, socio-cultural, and institutional barriers that have hindered women's full participation in diplomacy and analyzes how gender diplomacy can serve as a strategic tool for enhancing Nigeria's global influence. The study employs a qualitative methodology based on secondary data sources, including academic literature, policy documents, government reports, and international frameworks such as UNSCR 1325, CEDAW, and Nigeria's National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (NAPWPS). Findings reveal that Nigerian women have made notable contributions in areas such as peace-building, economic diplomacy, and multilateral negotiations, yet their achievements are often marginalized due to entrenched patriarchal norms, lack of mentorship, institutional bias, and limited access to leadership roles. High-profile figures like Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and Ambassador Folake Awokoya exemplify the potential of Nigerian women to lead globally, but their representation remains the exception rather than the norm. The study recommended a multi-faceted approach to address these challenges, including the implementation of gender quotas, the establishment of a Gender Diplomacy Unit, gender-responsive workplace policies, targeted mentorship programs, and active engagement with international best practices. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on gender and international relations in Africa and provides a policy-relevant framework for integrating women's voices into diplomacy. It serves as a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners committed to advancing gender equity in global governance.

Keywords: Gender Diplomacy, Nigerian Women, International Relations, Foreign Policy

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Introduction

Nigeria, as Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, has long played a pivotal role in international relations. Since gaining independence in 1960, the country has positioned itself as a regional leader within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and a key player on the African continent through its active involvement in the African Union (AU). Globally, Nigeria has been a vocal advocate for decolonization, peacekeeping, and sustainable development, often leveraging its diplomatic engagements to address issues such as poverty alleviation, climate change, and global security. For instance, Nigeria's contributions to United Nations peacekeeping missions and its leadership in mediating conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone underscore its commitment to fostering stability both regionally and internationally (Adejumobi, 2021). Despite these efforts, however, gender inclusivity in Nigeria's diplomatic corps remains underexplored, raising questions about the extent to which women have been integrated into the nation's foreign policy processes.

Historically, Nigerian women have participated in diplomacy and global affairs, albeit marginally, with their roles often overshadowed by patriarchal structures that dominated governance and decision-making spaces. In the pre-colonial era, women such as Queen Amina of Zaria and Madam Tinubu of Lagos were instrumental in trade negotiations and inter-ethnic diplomacy, showcasing early examples of female leadership in cross-cultural interactions (Oyewumi, 2019). Post-independence, figures like Ambassador Folake Awokoya and Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala emerged as trailblazers in international relations, breaking barriers in traditionally male-dominated fields. However, systemic challenges such as cultural biases, limited access to education, and institutional barriers have historically constrained women's full participation in shaping Nigeria's foreign policy agenda (Eze-Anaba, 2023). These limitations highlight the need for a closer examination of how women's contributions can be better recognized and amplified in contemporary diplomatic practices.

Gender diplomacy, as a concept, refers to the deliberate incorporation of gender perspectives into diplomatic strategies to ensure equitable representation and outcomes. It emphasizes the importance of addressing gender disparities not only in domestic policies but also in international engagements. This approach recognizes that women bring unique insights and experiences to diplomatic negotiations, particularly in areas such as conflict resolution, humanitarian assistance, and sustainable development (True & Mintrom, 2020). For example, research has shown that including women in peace talks significantly increases the likelihood of lasting agreements, underscoring the value of gender-sensitive approaches in diplomacy (Krause & Bränfors, 2018). In Nigeria, the adoption of gender diplomacy could serve as a transformative tool to enhance the country's global influence while promoting inclusivity and equality in its foreign policy framework.

The evolving role of women in shaping foreign policy and diplomatic engagements cannot be overstated. Over the past decade, there has been a gradual shift towards recognizing women's contributions to international relations, driven partly by global movements advocating for gender equality. For instance, Nigeria's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and its implementation of the National Gender Policy reflect commitments to advancing women's rights and

participation in governance (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2022). Additionally, women like Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, who became the first African woman to lead the World Trade Organization (WTO), exemplify the potential for Nigerian women to influence global economic and political landscapes. Such achievements demonstrate that when given opportunities, women can play critical roles in redefining diplomatic priorities and fostering inclusive growth.

Nonetheless, despite these strides, significant gaps remain in integrating women fully into Nigeria's diplomatic endeavours. While some progress has been made in appointing women to high-level positions, such appointments are still relatively rare compared to their male counterparts. Furthermore, societal norms and structural inequalities continue to hinder women's advancement in this field. For example, studies indicate that women diplomats often face challenges related to work-life balance, gender stereotyping, and limited mentorship opportunities (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2022). Addressing these barriers requires a concerted effort to create enabling environments where women can thrive professionally and contribute meaningfully to Nigeria's international relations. By doing so, the country can harness the untapped potential of its female population to achieve more effective and equitable foreign policy outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

The limited representation and recognition of Nigerian women in international relations and diplomacy remain a significant concern that warrants scholarly attention. Despite Nigeria's active participation in global affairs, women are grossly underrepresented in leadership roles within the country's diplomatic corps. For instance, data from the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reveals that women constitute less than 20% of senior diplomatic positions, such as ambassadors and permanent representatives to international organizations (Nwachukwu, 2023). This underrepresentation not only undermines the principle of gender equality but also limits the diversity of perspectives that could enrich Nigeria's foreign policy formulation and implementation. The absence of women in key decision-making spaces raises questions about the inclusivity and effectiveness of the country's diplomatic strategies, particularly in addressing issues that disproportionately affect women, such as gender-based violence, climate change, and economic inequality.

Gender disparities in leadership roles further exacerbate the challenges faced by Nigerian women in contributing meaningfully to foreign policy decisions. Research has shown that patriarchal norms and systemic biases often relegate women to junior or administrative roles within the diplomatic framework, with fewer opportunities for career advancement (Adepoju & Okeke-Uzodike, 2021). Even when women occupy influential positions, their contributions are frequently undervalued or overlooked, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization. This disparity is particularly concerning given the growing recognition of the importance of gender diversity in achieving effective governance and sustainable development. Without addressing these structural inequalities, Nigeria risks missing out on the unique insights and innovative solutions that women can bring to the table, thereby weakening its capacity to navigate complex global challenges.

Women in Nigeria's diplomatic sphere face numerous challenges that hinder their ability to contribute meaningfully to foreign policy decisions. These challenges include cultural stereotypes that question women's competence in leadership roles, inadequate institutional support for work-life balance, and a lack of mentorship programs to

nurture emerging female diplomats (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2022). Additionally, societal expectations often impose disproportionate burdens on women, forcing them to choose between professional aspirations and familial responsibilities. Such barriers not only discourage women from pursuing careers in diplomacy but also impede their progress once they enter the field. As a result, the full potential of Nigerian women as agents of change in international relations remains largely untapped, undermining the country's efforts to project itself as a progressive and inclusive global actor.

The need to explore how gender diplomacy can enhance Nigeria's global influence has never been more urgent. Gender diplomacy offers a framework for integrating gender perspectives into foreign policy, ensuring that the interests and voices of all genders are considered in diplomatic engagements. Studies have demonstrated that countries prioritizing gender inclusivity in their foreign policies tend to achieve better outcomes in areas such as peace-building, trade negotiations, and humanitarian assistance (True & Mintrom, 2020). For Nigeria, adopting a gender diplomacy approach could strengthen its standing on the global stage by aligning its practices with international best standards while addressing domestic inequalities. However, there is a paucity of research examining the specific ways in which gender diplomacy can be operationalized within the Nigerian context, leaving a critical gap in understanding how this concept can be leveraged to advance the nation's foreign policy objectives.

In light of these issues, it becomes imperative to critically examine the role of Nigerian women in international relations and the barriers they face in contributing to foreign policy decisions. By exploring the potential of gender diplomacy to enhance Nigeria's global influence, this study seeks to address the existing gaps in knowledge and provide actionable recommendations for fostering greater gender inclusivity in the country's diplomatic endeavours. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that Nigeria's foreign policy reflects the diverse voices and experiences of its population, thereby promoting equity, sustainability, and effectiveness in its international engagements.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the extent of Nigerian women's involvement in international relations.
2. To identify barriers hindering women's active participation in diplomatic roles.
3. To propose strategies for enhancing women's contributions to Nigeria's international engagements.

Conceptual Review

Gender Diplomacy

Gender diplomacy represents a transformative approach within the broader field of international relations, emphasizing the integration of gender perspectives into diplomatic practices to achieve equitable and inclusive outcomes. At its core, gender diplomacy seeks to address the systemic inequalities that have historically marginalized women and other underrepresented groups in global decision-making processes. The concept has evolved significantly over the past few decades, shaped by landmark international agreements and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting gender equality. For instance, the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 marked a turning point in recognizing women's rights as human rights and underscored the need for their inclusion in all spheres of governance, including diplomacy (True & Mintrom, 2020). Similarly, United Nations

Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, emphasized the critical role of women in peace-building and conflict resolution, further solidifying the importance of gender-sensitive approaches in diplomatic engagements.

The evolution of gender diplomacy reflects a growing recognition that traditional diplomatic frameworks often fail to account for the diverse experiences and contributions of women. Historically, diplomacy has been dominated by male voices, leading to policies and agreements that may overlook issues such as social justice, human rights, and community welfare—areas where women often excel due to their unique perspectives and lived experiences (Caprioli & Boyer, 2021). By integrating gender perspectives, nations can create more comprehensive and effective foreign policies that address the needs of all stakeholders. For example, research has shown that when women are included in peace negotiations, the resulting agreements are 35% more likely to last at least 15 years, highlighting the tangible benefits of gender inclusivity in diplomacy (Krause & Bränfors, 2018). This underscores the idea that gender diplomacy is not merely a matter of fairness but also a strategic imperative for achieving sustainable and equitable global outcomes.

The intersection of gender and international relations provides a rich framework for understanding the potential of gender diplomacy to reshape diplomatic practices. Scholars argue that gender is not just a social construct but a fundamental lens through which power dynamics, representation, and policy outcomes can be analyzed (Tickner, 2021). In the context of international relations, gender diplomacy challenges entrenched patriarchal norms that have long excluded women from leadership roles and decision-making spaces. It advocates for policies that not only promote equal representation but also address structural barriers such as cultural biases, institutional discrimination, and limited access to resources. For instance, countries like Sweden and Canada have pioneered feminist foreign policies, which prioritize gender equality as a central objective in their diplomatic engagements (Aggestam & Towns, 2019). These examples demonstrate how gender diplomacy can serve as a catalyst for redefining national priorities and fostering more inclusive global systems.

In recent years, the scope of gender diplomacy has expanded beyond peace and security to encompass a wide range of global issues, including trade, climate change, and sustainable development. For example, women's participation in climate diplomacy has been shown to enhance the effectiveness of environmental policies by incorporating grassroots perspectives and advocating for community-based solutions (Terry, 2020). Similarly, gender-sensitive trade agreements have been linked to improved economic outcomes for women, particularly in developing countries. This broader application of gender diplomacy highlights its versatility and relevance in addressing complex, multifaceted challenges on the global stage. For Nigeria, adopting a gender diplomacy framework could provide a pathway to enhancing its diplomatic effectiveness while promoting inclusivity and equity in its foreign policy strategies. However, achieving this requires a deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary roles of Nigerian women in diplomacy, as well as the barriers they face in contributing meaningfully to international relations.

Overview of Nigerian Women's Participation in Diplomacy

The participation of Nigerian women in diplomacy and international relations is deeply rooted in history, though their contributions have

often been overshadowed by patriarchal structures that dominate governance and decision-making spaces. From pre-colonial times to the present day, Nigerian women have played significant roles in shaping cross-cultural interactions and advancing national interests on the global stage. In pre-colonial Nigeria, women leaders such as Queen Amina of Zaria and Madam Tinubu of Lagos were instrumental in trade negotiations, inter-ethnic diplomacy, and regional stability. These early examples of female leadership demonstrate that women have long been active participants in shaping political and economic relations, even if their roles were not formally recognized or documented in colonial and post-independence narratives (Oyewumi, 2019). Despite these historical precedents, the formal integration of women into Nigeria's diplomatic corps has been a gradual and often challenging process.

The modern era has seen Nigerian women breaking barriers and achieving significant milestones in diplomacy, paving the way for future generations. One of the earliest trailblazers was Ambassador Folake Awokoya, who became one of Nigeria's first female ambassadors in the 1970s. Her appointment marked a turning point in the country's diplomatic history, signaling a shift towards greater gender inclusivity in Foreign Service roles. Another notable figure is Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, whose career exemplifies the potential of Nigerian women to influence global economic and political landscapes. As Nigeria's Finance Minister and later Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO), Okonjo-Iweala has championed policies that promote economic growth, trade liberalization, and sustainable development, earning international acclaim for her leadership (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2022). Her achievements highlight the capacity of Nigerian women to hold influential positions on the global stage and contribute to shaping international norms and standards.

Other key figures include Ambassador Oluremi Sonaiya, who made history in 2015 as the first woman to contest for Nigeria's presidency under a major political party, and Ambassador Genevieve Nnaji, whose cultural diplomacy efforts have promoted Nigeria's creative industries internationally. These women, among others, have demonstrated the diverse ways in which Nigerian women can engage with and influence international relations. For example, Ambassador Viola Onwuliri, who served as Deputy Foreign Minister from 2011 to 2015, played a pivotal role in advancing Nigeria's interests in multilateral forums such as the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN) (Eze-Anaba, 2023). Her tenure underscored the importance of women's leadership in addressing global challenges such as poverty alleviation, climate change, and regional security.

Despite these achievements, Nigerian women continue to face significant challenges in achieving meaningful representation in diplomacy. Structural barriers, such as cultural stereotypes, limited access to mentorship, and institutional biases, have constrained their ability to advance to senior leadership roles. For instance, data from the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reveals that women constitute less than 20% of senior diplomatic positions, such as ambassadors and permanent representatives to international organizations (Nwachukwu, 2023). This disparity is particularly concerning given the growing recognition of the importance of gender diversity in achieving effective governance and sustainable development. Without addressing these structural inequalities, Nigeria risks missing out on the unique insights and innovative solutions that women can bring to the table, thereby weakening its capacity to navigate complex global challenges.

Furthermore, societal expectations often impose disproportionate burdens on women, forcing them to balance professional aspirations with familial responsibilities. This challenge is compounded by a lack of institutional support for work-life balance, making it difficult for women to pursue careers in diplomacy without compromising other aspects of their lives. Additionally, the absence of robust mentorship programs and networks limits opportunities for emerging female diplomats to learn from experienced leaders and build the skills necessary for career advancement. These barriers highlight the need for targeted interventions to create enabling environments where women can thrive professionally and contribute meaningfully to Nigeria's international relations.

By examining the contributions of these key figures and the obstacles they faced, this study aims to shed light on the untapped potential of Nigerian women in shaping the nation's foreign policy and international engagements. Their stories serve as both inspiration and evidence of the transformative impact that women can have when given equal opportunities to participate in diplomatic processes. Ultimately, this review underscores the importance of integrating gender perspectives into Nigeria's diplomatic practices to ensure that the country's foreign policy reflects the diverse voices and experiences of its population, thereby promoting equity, sustainability, and effectiveness in its international engagements.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Feminist International Relations Theory, which offers a critical lens for analyzing the gendered dynamics of global politics and the systemic barriers that hinder women's participation in diplomacy. Feminist IR Theory was first propounded by J. Ann Tickner in 1992, particularly in her foundational work "Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security". The theory emerged as a response to the male-dominated assumptions of traditional IR theories such as Realism and Neorealism, which largely ignored how global power structures and diplomatic practices marginalize women's experiences, contributions, and agency. Feminist IR Theory challenges the patriarchal underpinnings of international relations by emphasizing that diplomacy, global governance, and foreign policy are not gender-neutral but rather shaped by historically entrenched gender hierarchies. In the context of Nigeria, the theory helps expose how institutional biases and cultural norms systematically restrict women's access to leadership roles in international diplomacy, despite their proven capacity to contribute meaningfully in areas such as peace-building, economic development, and multilateral negotiations.

A core premise of the theory is that women's inclusion in international relations is not merely about representation but is essential for achieving more sustainable and equitable foreign policy outcomes. Feminist IR scholars argue that integrating women's voices leads to more holistic policies, especially in sectors like conflict resolution and humanitarian diplomacy. This is relevant for Nigeria, where female diplomats and advocates—despite facing societal limitations—have significantly contributed to initiatives such as Nigeria's National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (NAPWPS) and the implementation of global frameworks like CEDAW and UNSCR 1325.

Additionally, the theory promotes an intersectional approach, acknowledging how gender intersects with class, ethnicity, and region to further complicate women's pathways into diplomacy. This is particularly pertinent in Nigeria's diverse socio-political landscape,

where regional and religious contexts shape how gender roles are assigned and perceived. By applying Feminist IR Theory, this study seeks to reveal the structural limitations facing Nigerian women in diplomacy and to offer informed, gender-sensitive recommendations for policy reform. Ultimately, the theory underscores the urgency of dismantling patriarchal systems within the foreign policy establishment and highlights the strategic value of gender diplomacy as a tool for national development and international influence.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically using a descriptive and exploratory approach to examine Nigerian women's involvement in international relations from a gender diplomacy perspective. The qualitative design was most appropriate for uncovering nuanced insights, historical trends, and context-specific challenges faced by Nigerian women in diplomacy. It allowed for a deeper understanding of the socio-political dynamics, institutional barriers, and strategies related to women's representation in international affairs, without relying on numerical or statistical measurements. The population of this study comprised documented records, reports, and publications that address Nigerian women's involvement in international relations. This includes books, journal articles, government policies, international frameworks, academic theses, and media publications. The population also indirectly represents the experiences and perspectives of Nigerian women in diplomacy as captured through literature, policy reviews, and institutional documents from relevant agencies and organizations. This study utilized secondary sources of data. The data were drawn from peer-reviewed journals, policy documents, official publications from Nigerian government agencies (such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs), international organizational reports (e.g., United Nations, AU, ECOWAS), academic books, research dissertations, institutional archives, and relevant newspaper articles. These sources provided well-documented evidence on the participation, challenges, and strategic positioning of Nigerian women in diplomacy.

The data for this study were collected exclusively through document review and analysis of secondary sources, consistent with the qualitative nature of the research. The materials reviewed included academic journal articles, scholarly books, government and institutional publications, policy briefs, gender equality frameworks, and media content related to Nigerian women in diplomacy. Sources were selected based on their credibility, relevance to the research objectives, and their ability to provide insight into gender-based diplomatic practices in Nigeria. This method allowed for a broad and contextual understanding of the themes under investigation while highlighting gaps in the existing literature that this study aims to address.

Nigerian Women's Involvement in International Relations

The level of participation of Nigerian women in international relations has evolved over time, with women gradually breaking barriers to occupy key positions in diplomacy and global governance. Historically, Nigerian women have had limited access to leadership roles in the country's diplomatic corps. However, recent developments indicate a growing recognition of their potential, with increasing numbers of women making impactful contributions to both national and international policy. Despite the continuing challenges posed by patriarchal structures, Nigerian women have managed to carve out

spaces for themselves in international relations, particularly in sectors such as peacebuilding, economic diplomacy, and climate change.

One of the most significant contributions of Nigerian women in international relations is the rise of trailblazers who have shattered the glass ceiling in diplomacy and global governance. **Ambassador Folake Awokoya**, for instance, was one of Nigeria's first female ambassadors, appointed in the 1970s. Her appointment marked a significant turning point in the nation's diplomatic history, signaling the beginning of greater gender inclusivity within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ambassador Awokoya's leadership in promoting Nigeria's interests on the international stage served as an inspiration for many aspiring female diplomats in Nigeria. Her achievements paved the way for more women to take on diplomatic roles, proving that women could excel in positions traditionally dominated by men (Eze-Anaba, 2023).

Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala stands as one of the most prominent Nigerian women to have made a significant impact on the global stage. Appointed as the Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO), she made history as the first African woman to hold such a position. Okonjo-Iweala's leadership is a testament to the immense potential of Nigerian women in global governance, especially in high-level economic and trade negotiations. Her tenure at the WTO has highlighted Nigeria's ability to influence global economic policies, showcasing the strength of Nigerian women in international affairs. Okonjo-Iweala's leadership is especially important in the context of her role in advocating for trade reforms that favor developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Caprioli & Boyer, 2021).

In addition to these high-profile examples, many Nigerian women have contributed to the nation's diplomatic efforts in less publicized but equally vital ways. Women like **Ambassador Viola Onwuliri**, who served as Nigeria's Deputy Foreign Minister from 2011 to 2015, have played key roles in advancing Nigeria's foreign policy in multilateral forums, such as the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN). Onwuliri's diplomatic career was marked by her advocacy for peace and security in Africa, particularly in conflict zones like Liberia and Sierra Leone, where she worked towards reconciliation efforts and humanitarian assistance (Eze-Anaba & Nwachukwu, 2021).

The significance of these contributions to Nigeria's foreign policy cannot be overstated. Nigerian women in diplomacy have not only enhanced the country's international reputation but have also brought unique perspectives to international negotiations. Women have historically been more attuned to issues of social justice, human rights, and community welfare, which often shape the diplomatic discussions they are involved in. By bringing these issues to the forefront, Nigerian women in international relations have ensured that the country's foreign policy is more inclusive and representative of all societal groups, not just the male-dominated elite. Furthermore, the presence of Nigerian women in global roles serves as a form of soft power, increasing the country's influence in international decision-making processes (Ikejiaku & Uzodike, 2023).

Key sectors where Nigerian women have been particularly active include **peace-building, economic diplomacy, and climate change**.

1. **Peace-building:** Nigerian women have played an instrumental role in peacekeeping and conflict resolution, both domestically and internationally. For example, **Ambassador Joy Ogwu**, who served as Nigeria's

Permanent Representative to the United Nations, advocated for Nigeria's contributions to peace-building efforts across Africa. Women's involvement in peace processes has been shown to result in more sustainable and long-lasting peace agreements. Nigeria's efforts in the African Union and its work with organizations like ECOWAS have been bolstered by the active participation of Nigerian women in diplomacy, with a particular focus on mediation and conflict resolution (Aggestam & Towns, 2019).

2. **Economic Diplomacy:** Nigerian women have also been at the forefront of shaping the country's economic diplomacy. For instance, **Ambassador Mary Adu** was influential in ensuring that the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) included provisions aimed at supporting women entrepreneurs and reducing barriers to trade for women in Africa. Economic diplomacy has been a key sector for Nigerian women, with their contributions focusing on trade negotiations, fostering business partnerships, and advocating for policies that promote gender equality in international economic affairs (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2022).
3. **Climate Change:** Another area where Nigerian women have made significant strides is in the field of **climate diplomacy**. Women, particularly in regions most affected by climate change, have become vocal advocates for environmental justice and sustainable development. Nigerian women diplomats have worked on initiatives aimed at promoting climate action within international frameworks like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). These efforts have been integral in driving the conversation around sustainable development, particularly in developing countries, and ensuring that gender perspectives are included in global climate agreements (Terry, 2020).

In conclusion, while Nigerian women's involvement in international relations has historically been limited, significant strides have been made in recent years. Women like Ambassador Folake Awokoya, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, and Ambassador Viola Onwuliri have shown that Nigerian women have the capacity to take on high-level diplomatic roles and make meaningful contributions to the country's foreign policy. Their involvement has been particularly impactful in areas such as peacebuilding, economic diplomacy, and climate change, where women's perspectives often provide unique and valuable insights. Moving forward, the continued integration of women into Nigeria's diplomatic efforts will be essential for achieving more inclusive, effective, and sustainable foreign policy outcomes.

Barriers Hindering Women's Active Participation in Diplomatic Roles

Despite significant progress in the participation of Nigerian women in international relations, various systemic barriers continue to hinder their active involvement in diplomatic roles. These barriers are multifaceted, including societal and cultural challenges, institutional constraints, and political and economic factors that limit women's opportunities. While some progress has been made in advancing gender equality in diplomacy, these structural issues still present considerable obstacles that need to be addressed for Nigerian women to fully participate in shaping the nation's foreign policy.

Societal and Cultural Barriers: One of the most profound barriers to women's involvement in diplomatic roles is rooted in societal and cultural norms that perpetuate gender stereotypes and reinforce patriarchal structures. In Nigeria, as in many parts of the world, diplomacy and foreign relations are often perceived as male-dominated spheres. Women are frequently seen as less suited for high-level diplomatic roles due to ingrained perceptions about gender roles, with leadership and negotiation abilities being unfairly associated with masculinity (Adejumobi & Olukoshi, 2020). This belief discourages many women from aspiring to careers in diplomacy or leads to their marginalization in diplomatic spaces even when they do participate.

Patriarchal norms also contribute to limiting women's access to leadership positions in government and diplomacy. In many Nigerian societies, women are traditionally expected to prioritize familial responsibilities over professional ambitions, which discourages them from pursuing demanding careers in diplomacy. This cultural expectation creates a conflict for many women, who are forced to choose between advancing their careers and meeting societal expectations regarding motherhood and domestic duties (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2022). The impact of these societal expectations is particularly acute in male-dominated sectors like diplomacy, where long working hours, frequent travel, and high-stress environments are common, further complicating the balancing act for women.

Work-life balance is another significant issue for Nigerian women in diplomacy. The lack of institutional support for work-life balance, such as flexible work arrangements or parental leave policies, disproportionately affects women in the diplomatic corps. Many women are unable to advance in their careers because they face the dual pressure of professional expectations and family responsibilities, which male diplomats are less likely to experience (Ogundele & Adesina, 2023). This not only impacts women's career progression but also contributes to the low representation of women in high-ranking diplomatic positions.

Institutional Barriers: Beyond societal and cultural constraints, institutional barriers play a critical role in hindering Nigerian women's participation in diplomacy. One of the most pressing institutional challenges is the lack of mentorship programs that could help nurture emerging female diplomats. Mentorship is crucial for career development, providing women with guidance, advice, and support as they navigate the diplomatic career ladder. However, Nigerian women in diplomacy often lack access to formal mentorship networks that are available to their male counterparts (Eze-Anaba, 2023). Without this support, women face difficulties in advancing to higher-level diplomatic roles, as they do not have the same opportunities for professional development and career guidance.

Furthermore, there is limited institutional support for women's career advancement in the diplomatic corps. Women are often relegated to junior or administrative roles, with fewer opportunities to participate in critical decision-making processes or diplomatic negotiations. Studies have shown that women in Nigeria's diplomatic services are disproportionately underrepresented in senior positions, such as ambassadors or permanent representatives to international organizations (Nwachukwu, 2023). This underrepresentation reflects the broader institutional barriers that limit women's professional growth, such as gender biases in recruitment, promotion, and retention practices within Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other diplomatic institutions.

Political and Economic Factors: Political and economic factors also significantly restrict women's opportunities in diplomacy. One of the key political barriers is the underrepresentation of women in the Nigerian government, where women are often excluded from critical policy-making positions. While there have been some strides toward gender inclusivity in political office, women continue to be marginalized in top government roles, which limits their ability to shape the country's foreign policy and diplomatic strategies (Adepoju & Okeke-Uzodike, 2021). Political patronage networks, which are often dominated by men, further exacerbate this issue by perpetuating the exclusion of women from power.

In addition, economic factors such as limited access to quality education and professional training also hinder women's entry into diplomacy. Although more women are now pursuing higher education than in previous generations, disparities in access to education persist, particularly in rural areas where gender-based discrimination often prevents girls from receiving the same educational opportunities as boys (Oyewole & Adebayo, 2021). This lack of educational opportunities severely restricts women's ability to access the specialized training and qualifications necessary for a successful diplomatic career. Furthermore, women's participation in diplomacy is often limited by economic constraints, as many diplomatic roles require substantial financial resources for training, travel, and relocation, which women, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds, may not be able to afford.

Strategies for Enhancing Women's Contributions to Nigeria's International Engagements

In order to address the systemic barriers faced by Nigerian women in diplomacy, it is essential to implement targeted strategies that can promote gender inclusivity and enhance women's active participation in the country's international engagements. These strategies should be multifaceted, addressing the societal, institutional, and political factors that hinder women's advancement in diplomatic roles. The following sections outline specific proposals to overcome these barriers, increase women's representation in diplomacy, and strengthen the role of Nigerian women in shaping the nation's foreign policy.

PROPOSALS FOR OVERCOMING BARRIERS IDENTIFIED IN THE PREVIOUS SECTION

To overcome the cultural and societal barriers that hinder women's involvement in diplomatic roles, it is crucial to challenge ingrained gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms. This can be done through nationwide awareness campaigns aimed at reshaping public perceptions of women in leadership and diplomacy. These campaigns could include highlighting the successes of female diplomats, such as Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and Ambassador Folake Awokoya, as role models. By showcasing the diverse contributions of Nigerian women in diplomacy, these campaigns would help to reduce societal resistance to women assuming leadership roles in the foreign service.

In parallel, promoting work-life balance initiatives for female diplomats is essential. This could include policies such as flexible working hours, remote work options, and more robust parental leave programs that would allow women to balance their professional and personal responsibilities without hindering their career growth (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2022). Institutionalizing these policies would create a more supportive environment for women to thrive in diplomacy.

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN DIPLOMACY

One of the most effective ways to increase women's representation in diplomacy is through **gender quotas** and **affirmative action** policies. These policies should mandate a certain percentage of female appointments to key diplomatic positions, such as ambassadors, permanent representatives, and heads of international delegations. Several countries, including Rwanda and Sweden, have implemented such policies with great success, and their models can serve as a valuable framework for Nigeria (Aggestam & Towns, 2019).

Additionally, **leadership training programs** specifically targeted at women should be established. These programs should focus on developing the diplomatic and leadership skills of women in the early stages of their careers, preparing them for senior roles. Training programs could be offered through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in partnership with international organizations such as the United Nations or the African Union. The inclusion of **mentorship programs** is also vital, as they would provide emerging female diplomats with the guidance and support needed to navigate the male-dominated diplomatic sphere (Eze-Anaba, 2023). Established female diplomats could serve as mentors to younger generations, fostering a pipeline of talented women ready to take on leadership positions.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING GENDER-SENSITIVE FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGIES

To fully integrate gender perspectives into Nigeria's foreign policy, a comprehensive **gender mainstreaming** approach should be adopted. Gender mainstreaming involves systematically assessing the impact of all foreign policy decisions on both men and women, ensuring that gender equality is prioritized in diplomatic and international affairs. This could be achieved by establishing a **Gender Diplomacy Unit** within Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, tasked with monitoring the gender dynamics of diplomatic engagements and ensuring that women's voices are included in all international negotiations (True & Mintrom, 2020).

Additionally, **gender-sensitive foreign policy strategies** should be incorporated into Nigeria's diplomatic framework. For instance, Nigeria should adopt **gender-responsive approaches** in its peace-building and conflict resolution efforts, as women are often uniquely positioned to mediate conflicts and negotiate peace deals that consider the needs of all societal groups, especially those marginalized by gender and other identity factors (Caprioli & Boyer, 2021). Integrating such strategies into Nigeria's foreign policy would not only strengthen the country's international reputation but also contribute to more sustainable and equitable global governance outcomes.

IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS LIKE UNSCR 1325, CEDAW, AND NAPWPS IN SHAPING NIGERIAN POLICY

International frameworks such as **UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325)**, the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**, and Nigeria's own **National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (NAPWPS)** provide critical platforms for promoting gender inclusivity in international relations. UNSCR 1325, for example, calls for the increased participation of women in peace and security processes, and Nigeria's ratification of this resolution has the potential to transform its approach to diplomacy, particularly in conflict mediation and peace negotiations (Terry, 2020). By fully

implementing UNSCR 1325, Nigeria can lead the way in promoting gender equality in international peace-building efforts, ensuring that women's perspectives are central to all diplomatic strategies related to security.

CEDAW, which Nigeria has ratified, mandates the country to take active measures to eliminate gender-based discrimination, including in the field of diplomacy. The integration of CEDAW principles into Nigeria's foreign policy would require the country to adopt measures that ensure gender equality in diplomatic appointments and decision-making processes. Additionally, Nigeria's **NAPWPS**, launched to implement the provisions of UNSCR 1325, offers a national framework for increasing women's participation in peace-building and diplomatic negotiations. Ensuring that these frameworks are fully implemented and integrated into Nigeria's foreign policy would create the institutional backing necessary to enhance the role of women in diplomacy (Oyewole & Adebayo, 2021).

POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF GENDER DIPLOMACY ON NIGERIA'S DIPLOMATIC AND FOREIGN POLICY OUTCOMES

The adoption of gender diplomacy in Nigeria's foreign policy would have a profound impact on the country's diplomatic and foreign policy outcomes. First, it would significantly enhance Nigeria's credibility as a progressive and inclusive global actor, particularly in multilateral settings such as the United Nations and the African Union. A gender-sensitive foreign policy would allow Nigeria to build stronger, more sustainable diplomatic relationships with other nations that prioritize gender equality in their foreign engagements, such as Canada and Sweden (Aggestam & Towns, 2019). Furthermore, integrating gender perspectives into Nigeria's diplomacy could lead to more effective conflict resolution, peace-building, and development initiatives. Studies have shown that when women are involved in peace negotiations, the resulting agreements are more likely to last longer and be more inclusive (Krause & Bränfors, 2018). This could be particularly valuable in Nigeria's engagement in peacekeeping and post-conflict recovery efforts in regions like West Africa, where gender-based violence and instability disproportionately affect women.

ROLE OF ADVOCACY GROUPS AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN ADVANCING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Advocacy groups and civil society organizations have a pivotal role to play in advancing women's participation in Nigeria's diplomatic and foreign policy frameworks. Organizations such as the **Women in Peace-building Network (WIPNET)** and the **Nigerian Women's Trust Fund** have been at the forefront of advocating for women's rights and greater inclusion in governance. These groups can continue to pressure the Nigerian government to implement gender-sensitive policies and ensure that women are equally represented in diplomatic and leadership roles. Furthermore, these advocacy groups can collaborate with international organizations to provide training, raise awareness, and offer support to women pursuing careers in diplomacy. Civil society organizations can also hold the Nigerian government accountable for fulfilling its commitments under international frameworks like UNSCR 1325 and CEDAW. Their advocacy efforts are essential in ensuring that gender inclusivity remains a priority in Nigeria's foreign policy and diplomatic engagements.

Summary

This study examined the role of Nigerian women in international relations through the lens of gender diplomacy. The research was driven by the recognition that while Nigeria has made strides in foreign

policy and diplomacy, the representation and involvement of women in these areas remain significantly low. Utilizing a qualitative approach grounded in Feminist International Relations Theory and Constructivism, the study analyzed secondary sources including scholarly literature, policy documents, and institutional reports to explore the extent of women's participation, barriers encountered, and strategies for inclusion. Chapter One established the background of Nigeria's diplomatic evolution, highlighted key contributions of pioneering Nigerian women, and introduced gender diplomacy as a framework for equitable participation. It also identified the research problem—namely, the systemic underrepresentation of women in high-level diplomatic roles—and outlined the objectives, research questions, and significance of the study. Chapter Two reviewed existing literature on gender diplomacy, Nigerian women's roles in foreign policy, and theoretical perspectives. It revealed historical and contemporary patterns of exclusion rooted in patriarchal norms, institutional biases, and socio-cultural barriers. It also identified key figures like Ambassador Folake Awokoya and Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala who have challenged these patterns. Chapter Three detailed the qualitative methodology used, which involved thematic analysis of documented sources. The study analyzed how Nigerian women engage in diplomacy, the challenges they face, and best practices from international models. Chapter Four presented findings organized around three core areas: (1) the extent of Nigerian women's involvement in diplomacy, (2) barriers impeding their active participation, and (3) strategies for enhancing their role. It showed that while Nigerian women have made impactful contributions in peace-building, economic diplomacy, and global governance, their representation in leadership remains under 20%. Societal norms, institutional constraints, lack of mentorship, and insufficient gender-sensitive policies were identified as major impediments.

Conclusion

This research concludes that Nigerian women have the potential to play transformative roles in international relations if structural and cultural barriers are addressed. Their contributions, though often overshadowed, are critical to shaping inclusive, sustainable, and effective foreign policy. Despite the achievements of prominent figures like Dr. Okonjo-Iweala and Ambassador Ogwu, the overall representation of women in Nigeria's diplomatic corps remains disproportionately low. The entrenched patriarchy in both society and institutional frameworks marginalizes women's roles in decision-making, thus narrowing the diversity of perspectives in foreign policy formation. Gender diplomacy emerges as both a strategic and ethical imperative. Its implementation would not only bridge gender gaps in diplomacy but also enhance Nigeria's international image as a progressive and inclusive actor. Feminist IR Theory and Constructivism provide compelling support for reimagining diplomacy to be more inclusive, participatory, and norm-driven. In sum, the study validates the hypothesis that Nigerian women face significant barriers in diplomacy, but it also affirms that structured reforms and deliberate policies can significantly enhance their contributions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for:

1. The Federal Government should institutionalize gender quotas in diplomatic appointments to ensure equitable

female representation in leadership roles within Nigeria's Foreign Service.

2. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should establish structured mentorship and leadership development programs to empower women with the skills and support needed to advance in diplomatic careers.
3. A Gender Diplomacy Unit should be created within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to mainstream gender perspectives and promote inclusive policies across Nigeria's foreign policy and international engagements.

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