

# Equality or Reverse Suppression? Rethinking Affirmative Action for Women In African Politics

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the extent to which affirmative action for women in African politics has undermined democracy in selected African countries. It questions the possibility of affirmative action in the promotion of equality and fairness in democratic societies. This suspicion or question is based on the fact that, in an attempt to give affirmative action for women in African politics, critical democratic principles such as free, fair, and credible elections are sacrificed. This has had severe implications for good governance and democratic consolidation in most African countries, especially Nigeria. Drawing on qualitative data that was sourced through desktop reviews and analysis, this article examines how affirmative action for women in African politics is undermining the sacred democratic ethos in Africa. It argues that while affirmative action is meant to solve the problem of discrimination against women in African politics, it also highlights more ravaging problems limiting democratic consolidation in selected African states. It concludes that affirmative action within the confines of law, justice, and democratic principles is likely to deepen democracy in selected African states.*

**Keywords:** *Affirmative, Action, Equality, Politics, women.*

## Introduction

The question of gender and youth participation in politics has long occupied scholarly and policy debates across Africa. Conventional literature frequently frames women as structurally disadvantaged in accessing political office due to entrenched patriarchy, financial constraints, violence, and exclusion from party structures (Umeh, Okorie & Olaniyan, 2023; Wazakari & Yakubu, 2024). To remedy this, many African states and political parties have adopted affirmative action measures, such as subsidized or free nomination forms for women, reserved parliamentary seats, or constitutional quotas mandating gender balance (Bauer & Burnet, 2013; Goetz, 2003). These interventions are normatively justified on the grounds of *equity*: the view that substantive equality requires compensatory advantages to overcome historical exclusion.

Yet, a critical question arises: do such measures always advance democratic equality, or do they sometimes create new forms of structural suppression? The 2023 gubernatorial election in Adamawa State, Nigeria, illustrates this dilemma vividly. In a controversial move, the Resident Electoral Commissioner prematurely declared Senator Aishatu “Binani” Dahiru Ahmed as the winner before collation was completed, a decision widely perceived as an attempt to “make history” by producing Nigeria’s first female governor. The declaration was later annulled, and the male incumbent, Ahmadu Fintiri, was confirmed the rightful winner. The incident underscores the tension between symbolic representation and democratic due process, raising the normative question of whether institutional efforts to empower women can inadvertently suppress men’s access to equal and fair competition (Asaju & Dogo, 2024; Ugwu, 2024).

This paradox is not unique to Nigeria. Across Africa, gender quotas and affirmative action have produced impressive numerical outcomes but also contentious debates. Rwanda, for instance, boasts the world’s highest proportion of women in parliament—over 60%—largely due to constitutionally entrenched quotas (Powley, 2005). While hailed globally as a success story, critics argue that such dominance is state-engineered rather than organically achieved, and risks marginalizing men in open competition. Similarly, Uganda’s system of reserved district seats for women has guaranteed women’s presence in parliament but often relegates them to quota seats, limiting opportunities for contesting in “open” constituencies (Tamale, 1999;

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Clayton, Josefsson & Wang, 2019). Kenya's constitutional "two-thirds gender rule," designed to prevent overrepresentation by any gender, has sparked protracted legal and political struggles, with parties and candidates contesting its fairness and feasibility (Cheeseman, Lynch & Willis, 2016). These examples highlight a regional pattern: policies meant to enhance women's inclusion may unintentionally introduce new inequities that undermine the principle of equal access for all citizens.

This paper interrogates the assumption that willingness or institutional support for women's participation automatically translates into genuine equality. It argues that affirmative measures, while corrective in intent, can also distort democratic competition if they privilege one gender at the expense of another. The central research question is thus: *do policies designed to enhance women's political participation constitute true equality, or do they create reverse structural suppression of men?*

To address this question, the paper adopts a comparative case study approach. Adamawa 2023 serves as the core case, offering a real-time example of how symbolic gender inclusion can conflict with electoral fairness. Comparative insights are drawn from Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya to situate the Nigerian case within broader African debates on quotas, reserved seats, and constitutional gender rules. By examining both the promises and contradictions of gender-based affirmative action, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions on democracy, representation, and the meaning of equality in Africa.

### **Tracing the problem in the Affirmative Action for women in African Politics**

Indeed, the increased rate of discrimination against women in African politics led to the affirmative action initiative, specifically designed to enhance women's participation in African politics. It was specifically initiated to enhance the equal participation of women, just like their male counterparts, in African politics. However, the reality in Nigeria, especially in the Adamawa 2023 governorship election, shows that the affirmative action that created opportunities for women to participate in the election almost ruined the democratic process. Evidence showed that the same affirmative action, meant to curb discrimination against women's participation in the Adamawa state governorship election, was used to rig the election in favor of the woman, who contested against the incumbent governor. How politicians illegally deploy affirmative action to cause more ravaging political crises during and after general elections is the focus of this article. While the affirmative action initiative has generated attention and commendation, it also raises concerns for utility and sustainability, especially in the consolidation of Nigeria's democracy.

While extensive scholarship has explored the benefits and limitations of gender quotas in Africa (Powley, 2005; Tamale, 1999; Clayton et al., 2019; Dahlerup, 2006; Krook, 2009), little attention has been given to the potential for reverse structural suppression. Much of the literature treats women as the only systematically disadvantaged group, overlooking how interventions may inadvertently disadvantage men or destabilize electoral fairness. The Adamawa 2023 case thus opens a new frontier for research: how can African democracies balance equity (correcting women's exclusion) with equality (ensuring fair competition for all), without undermining electoral legitimacy?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Theoretical Perspectives on Gender, Equality, and Representation**

Debates on women's political participation are grounded in broader theories of justice, equality, and democratic inclusion. Anne Phillips (1995) argues for the *politics of presence*, emphasizing that women's representation is not just about numbers but about ensuring that different lived experiences shape decision-making. Iris Marion Young (1990) similarly critiques universalist notions of equality, proposing instead a model of *group-differentiated politics* where marginalized groups may require special measures, such as quotas, to achieve fairness. Nancy Fraser (1997) advances this debate by distinguishing between *redistribution* (addressing economic inequalities) and *recognition* (addressing cultural and symbolic exclusion), suggesting that both are essential for gender justice. These theoretical perspectives justify affirmative action as a corrective to structural disadvantage. Yet, they also open space for critique: when such measures privilege recognition without redistribution, they risk creating perceptions of unfair advantage.

## Structural Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Africa

Across sub-Saharan Africa, women's access to political office has been limited by patriarchal norms, party patronage systems, and unequal access to campaign resources. Women often face gender-based violence, harassment, and cultural stigmatization that discourage political ambition (The Guardian, 2024). Campaign financing is also skewed, with political networks and resources disproportionately favoring men (Spectator Africa, 2024). These realities support Young's (1990) argument that formal equality is insufficient; without structural reforms, women remain marginalized despite constitutional guarantees of equal rights.

### Affirmative Action and Quotas: Expanding Representation

In response, many African states have adopted quota systems and other affirmative action measures. Rwanda's 2003 constitution introduced a 30% gender quota, resulting in women now occupying more than 60% of parliamentary seats, the highest globally (Le Monde, 2024; Powley, 2005). Uganda institutionalized reserved district seats for women, ensuring their guaranteed presence in the legislature (Tamale, 1999). Kenya's 2010 constitution established the "two-thirds gender rule," mandating that no more than two-thirds of positions be held by one gender (The Conversation, 2017; BBC, 2022). These measures illustrate Dahlerup's (2006) and Krook's (2009) argument that quotas can radically transform women's descriptive representation and normalize their presence in politics.

### Symbolism, Backlash, and Emerging Inequalities

Despite these successes, quotas raise questions of legitimacy, symbolism, and unintended consequences. In Uganda, scholars note that women often remain confined to reserved seats, perpetuating the perception that they cannot compete in open contests (Clayton, Josefsson & Wang, 2019). In Kenya, the two-thirds gender principle has faced legal contestation and political resistance, generating backlash from elites and citizens alike (The Conversation, 2017). Critics argue that such measures risk tokenism and invite public skepticism regarding merit (Phillips, 1995; Clayton et al., 2019). These tensions align with Fraser's (1997) warning that recognition alone, without addressing structural redistributive inequalities, may create fragile and contested forms of justice.

### Nigeria and the Adamawa 2023 Gubernatorial Election

Nigeria illustrates both the persistence of barriers and the controversies surrounding gender-based interventions. Women remain starkly underrepresented in elective office compared to regional peers. The 2023 Adamawa gubernatorial election stands out: Aishatu "Binani" Dahiru Ahmed was prematurely declared winner by the Resident Electoral Commissioner before collation was completed. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) annulled this declaration and confirmed incumbent Ahmadu Fintiri as winner (EU EOM, 2023; BBC, 2023; Premium Times, 2023). For many observers, the incident revealed pressures to produce Nigeria's first female governor, raising concerns that symbolic milestones were prioritized over electoral integrity. This aligns with Young's (1990) caution that differentiated measures, if misapplied, may create new exclusions—in this case, what could be described as *reverse suppression*, where men's rights to equal competition are compromised.

## Methodology

This study adopts a comparative case study approach, focusing on the 2023 Adamawa gubernatorial election in Nigeria as the core case, with Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya as comparative cases. The comparative strategy is appropriate for uncovering patterns of gender-based inclusion and exclusion across varying political contexts (George & Bennett, 2005; Lijphart, 1971). The Adamawa case is particularly significant due to its high-profile controversy involving the premature declaration of Nigeria's first potential female governor, which highlights tensions between gender equity initiatives and electoral integrity (EU EOM, 2023; BBC, 2023; Premium Times, 2023).

## Case Selection

The cases were selected using a most-different systems design. Rwanda represents the high-achievement end of gender quotas globally, with women constituting over 60% of its parliament (Powley, 2005; Le Monde, 2024). Uganda provides a model of reserved district seats for women that has become normalized in political practice but criticized for perpetuating tokenism (Tamale, 1999; Clayton, Josefsson & Wang, 2019). Kenya illustrates a case of constitutional innovation—the two-thirds gender rule—that remains highly contested in practice (The Conversation, 2017; BBC, 2022). Nigeria, by contrast, reflects a context of persistent underrepresentation of women where symbolic breakthroughs, such as the Adamawa election, spark legitimacy crises.

## Data Sources

The analysis draws on three categories of data:

1. **Official documents and reports** – including election observation reports (e.g., EU EOM, 2023), INEC statements, and constitutional/legal frameworks on gender quotas (Kenya Constitution, 2010; Rwanda Constitution, 2003; Uganda Constitution, 1995).
2. **Media coverage** – particularly from reputable international and African outlets such as *BBC News* (2022, 2023), *Premium Times* (2023), *The Guardian* (2024), *The Conversation* (2017), and *Le Monde* (2024). These sources capture public debates and controversies around women's political participation.
3. **Secondary literature** – including scholarly analyses of gender quotas, feminist democratic theory, and African electoral politics (Phillips, 1995; Young, 1990; Fraser, 1997; Dahlerup, 2006; Krook, 2009; Tamale, 1999; Clayton et al., 2019).

## Analytical Strategy

The study employs qualitative content analysis to examine how structural suppression operates in each case. For Adamawa 2023, special attention is given to the role of institutional actors (INEC, political parties) and the framing of gender in electoral controversies. Comparative cases are used to contextualize whether similar tensions between equity and equality appear in quota-driven systems. The analysis is guided by Fraser's (1997) framework of *redistribution vs. recognition* and Young's (1990) theory of *group-differentiated politics*, enabling a theoretical evaluation of whether gender-based measures in Africa produce justice or inadvertently undermine electoral equality.

## Findings and Analysis

### Adamawa 2023: Symbolism versus Electoral Integrity

The Adamawa gubernatorial election of March–April 2023 marked one of the most controversial contests in Nigeria's democratic history. The premature declaration of Aishatu “Binani” Dahiru Ahmed as winner by the Resident Electoral Commissioner, before collation was completed, was widely condemned as illegal and was annulled by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (EU EOM, 2023; Premium Times, 2023; BBC, 2023).

Supporters of Binani celebrated the moment as historic, framing it as a breakthrough for women in Nigeria's politics. However, critics argued that the irregularity undermined electoral fairness, since procedural safeguards were bypassed in what many suspected was an attempt to prioritize symbolic representation (Nigeria's “first female governor”) over due process. This case illustrates the core tension of this study: while women face structural barriers to political participation, efforts to fast-track their inclusion can create perceptions of bias against men, producing what may be seen as *reverse suppression*.

## **Rwanda: Institutionalizing Women’s Dominance**

Rwanda is often celebrated as the global leader in women’s representation, with women holding over 60% of parliamentary seats since 2013 (Powley, 2005; Le Monde, 2024). This success is rooted in the post-genocide 2003 constitution, which reserved at least 30% of seats for women. Over time, women have gained not only numerical strength but also visibility in high offices, including ministerial and judicial positions.

However, critics argue that Rwanda’s dominance of women in parliament is partly symbolic, as the political environment remains tightly controlled by the ruling party (Dahlerup, 2006). The Rwandan case demonstrates that quotas can normalize women’s leadership, but also raises questions about whether high descriptive representation translates into substantive empowerment.

## **Uganda: Reserved Seats and the Tokenism Debate**

Uganda institutionalised reserved seats for women in parliament under the 1995 constitution, requiring that each district elect a female representative (Tamale, 1999). This system has guaranteed women’s presence in national politics, producing a steady rise in female legislators.

Yet, research shows that many women remain confined to these reserved positions, with relatively few competing in open seats (Clayton, Josefsson & Wang, 2019). Critics argue this creates a form of “institutionalized tokenism,” where women are represented but not empowered to challenge entrenched patriarchal hierarchies. Uganda’s case thus shows how affirmative action can simultaneously open doors and reinforce ceilings.

## **Kenya: The Two-Thirds Gender Rule and Resistance**

Kenya’s 2010 constitution introduced the “two-thirds gender rule,” which mandates that no more than two-thirds of elective or appointive offices be held by one gender. While progressive in theory, implementation has faced persistent political and judicial resistance (The Conversation, 2017; BBC, 2022). Parliament has repeatedly failed to pass enabling legislation, and compliance in elective offices remains uneven.

The Kenyan case illustrates the difficulty of translating constitutional ideals into practice when political elites resist redistribution of power. It underscores Fraser’s (1997) argument that recognition-based reforms must be matched with redistributive measures—such as financial support or enforcement mechanisms—to achieve meaningful justice.

## **Comparative Insights: Balancing Equity and Equality**

The four cases reveal variation in how African states manage women’s political participation:

- Nigeria (Adamawa 2023) – highlights the dangers of symbolic gestures that undermine procedural integrity.
- Rwanda – demonstrates how quotas can normalize women’s leadership but may be tied to authoritarian politics.
- Uganda – shows how reserved seats can guarantee inclusion but risk confining women to tokenistic roles.
- Kenya – illustrates the tension between constitutional ideals and political resistance to implementation.

Taken together, these cases show that affirmative action in Africa is not a uniform solution but a contested terrain where equity and equality collide. While measures to boost women's representation are necessary to dismantle structural barriers, they may also generate perceptions of unfairness or distortions in democratic competition. The Adamawa 2023 episode represents a cautionary tale: without careful institutional safeguards, gender-based reforms may inadvertently compromise electoral legitimacy.

## Discussion

The findings of this study raise critical questions about the meaning of equality, fairness, and justice in political participation within African democracies. The Adamawa 2023 gubernatorial election illustrates how the pursuit of symbolic gender victories can collide with democratic integrity. The attempt to prematurely declare Aishatu “Binani” Dahiru as governor-elect, despite irregularities in the counting process, reveals a paradox: measures designed to promote women's political participation may unintentionally undermine electoral credibility if they privilege symbolic milestones over procedural fairness. This aligns with Phillips' (1995) argument in *The Politics of Presence* that the visibility of women in politics is important but must be reconciled with broader democratic principles.

Comparative evidence from Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya further demonstrates this paradox. In Rwanda, women's unprecedented parliamentary dominance has been celebrated as a global model of gender inclusion (Powley, 2005), yet critics argue that these gains are shaped by state-engineered quotas rather than organic political competition, raising questions about substantive influence (Le Monde, 2024).

Uganda's long-standing quota system ensures female representation, but Tamale (1999) and Clayton, Josefsson, & Wang (2019) show that it has reinforced hierarchical politics, with women often restricted to “soft” issues, illustrating Young's (1990) concern that group-differentiated measures can inadvertently entrench marginalization. Kenya, in contrast, highlights the difficulty of institutionalizing equity: repeated failures to implement the “two-thirds gender rule” (BBC, 2022; The Conversation, 2017) demonstrate how structural resistance within political systems undermines reform, despite formal commitments.

Taken together, these cases reflect Fraser's (1997) distinction between *recognition* and *redistribution*. Policies that merely recognize women's identities and guarantee numerical inclusion may not redistribute political resources, power, or decision-making influence. Instead, they may generate what Fraser terms “affirmative remedies” that address cultural visibility but leave structural inequalities intact. This helps explain why quotas may appear progressive while male aspirants—often shouldering higher financial costs of candidacy—perceive themselves as disadvantaged, as noted in the Adamawa case.

This study therefore, contributes to the broader debate on gender and democracy in Africa by showing that equity-driven interventions must be critically assessed for their unintended consequences. While quotas and special measures are necessary to overcome historical exclusions, their application must be balanced with safeguards to prevent what can be perceived as “reverse suppression” of men or the undermining of electoral credibility. The challenge is not merely about numbers but about ensuring that inclusion fosters genuine competition, accountability, and democratic legitimacy. In this sense, Krook's (2009) analysis of quotas as tools of candidate selection reform remains instructive: the design and implementation of such measures matter as much as their presence.

Ultimately, the Adamawa 2023 case demonstrates that gender-sensitive reforms must go beyond symbolic breakthroughs to engage deeper questions of fairness, redistribution, and democratic consolidation. This calls for a recalibration of gender-based political interventions in Africa, one that is attentive to both women's empowerment and the integrity of democratic institutions.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the paradoxes of gender-based political participation in Africa through a core case study of the Adamawa 2023 gubernatorial election and comparative examples from Rwanda, Uganda, and

Kenya. The findings reveal that while gender quotas and special measures are crucial in addressing historical exclusions, their implementation often raises questions about fairness, legitimacy, and the balance between equity and equality.

The Adamawa case demonstrates how the pursuit of symbolic milestones—such as electing a first female governor—can come into tension with electoral credibility when due process is compromised. Rwanda's global reputation as a gender inclusion leader shows the possibilities of quota systems, but also highlights concerns about whether numerical presence translates into substantive power. Uganda's experience underscores the risks of institutionalizing quotas in ways that reinforce political hierarchies, while Kenya exemplifies the challenges of enforcing gender reforms in resistant political environments.

Theoretically, this study has shown that Fraser's (1997) distinction between redistribution and recognition is useful for analyzing the limits of quota-based reforms. Phillips' (1995) call for the politics of presence provides a rationale for increasing women's visibility, but Young (1990) cautions that differentiated measures must not entrench dependency or tokenism. Together, these insights suggest that gender-based reforms in African politics require a careful balance between symbolic representation and structural transformation.

## Recommendations

1. **Policy Design:** Gender quotas and affirmative measures should be paired with reforms that lower structural barriers, such as reducing candidate fees, curbing patronage politics, and strengthening women's access to campaign finance, so that women's participation is not merely symbolic.
2. **Institutional Safeguards:** Electoral bodies must ensure that gender-sensitive interventions do not compromise democratic procedures, as seen in Adamawa 2023. Transparency and procedural integrity must remain central to gender reforms.
3. **Capacity Building:** Beyond quotas, political parties should invest in leadership training, mentorship, and support networks for women candidates to foster substantive participation.
4. **Context-Sensitive Approaches:** As the regional variation shows, no single model of gender reform fits all African democracies. Policies must be adapted to local political cultures and institutional contexts.
5. **Scholarly Contribution:** Future research should move beyond the numbers game of women's representation to examine the qualitative impact of women in office, the perceptions of male aspirants, and the broader legitimacy of democratic institutions.

In sum, the Adamawa 2023 case and the comparative African experiences demonstrate that the pursuit of gender equity in politics is both necessary and fraught. It requires continuous recalibration to ensure that measures aimed at inclusion do not inadvertently undermine the democratic ideals of fairness, competition, and accountability.

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