

Navigating the Diplomatic Labyrinth: Women's Involvement in Nigeria's Foreign Service Under Obasanjo and Buhari

Mbah, Deborah Chimhurumnanya; and Ayanlowo, Oluwatosin

Department of History and International Studies, School of Education and Humanities, Babcock University, Ilishan Remo, Ogun State.

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Abstract

Women's Participation in diplomatic duties has received global attention in recent years. Despite commendable governmental initiative like the National Gender Policy, which set a 35% target for women's participation, gender inclusivity in Nigeria's foreign service remains elusive. Thus, this study set out to investigate Women's involvement in Nigerian Foreign Service during Obasanjo and Buhari Administrations. The study adopted a historical research methodology. Primary sources included interviews with five (5) professionals who were purposively selected due to their experience in the Nigerian Foreign Service. Furthermore, secondary sources utilized journals, government records, gender policy documents. The study adopted the liberal feminism and role congruity theories in analyzing concepts, patterns and trends observed in the study. The study revealed that while the Obasanjo administration laid the groundwork for increased female representation through institutional reforms and symbolic appointments, the Buhari administration recorded a modest numerical improvement in women's participation. The study also found that despite obvious strides towards women involvement in the foreign service, both administrations fell short of achieving substantive gender parity, as structural barriers such as patriarchal norms, political patronage, and limited career advancement opportunities continued to hinder women's full integration into the foreign service. The study concluded that sustainable progress requires deliberate policy frameworks, gender-sensitive recruitment and promotion practices, and stronger political commitment. The study therefore recommended that women's leadership in Nigeria's foreign policy landscape should be encouraged through representation in diplomatic offices by government reserved quotas.

Keywords: Women Involvement, Nigerian Foreign Service, Gender Policy, Role Congruity, Liberal Feminism.

Introduction: The Crucible of Global Representation

The Foreign Service is the professional diplomatic corps tasked with representing a nation's interests and foreign policy on the international stage. Its officers are carefully selected and trained, acting as embodiments of their country's policies, values, and culture abroad. Operating from embassies and consulates, they serve as vital conduits for communication and cooperation between their home nation and host countries. Described as the eyes, ears, and voice of ministries responsible for foreign affairs, the Foreign Service is crucial for monitoring global events, influencing policy, promoting exports, fostering trade, and ensuring security, particularly in navigating uncertainty and establishing connections in

new markets (Adeniji, 2005; Ogunsanwo, 2013). For Nigeria, foreign relations were crucial for early post-independence development. Just a week after gaining sovereignty on October 1, 1960, Nigeria joined the United Nations (UN), symbolizing its desire to participate in global affairs and gain international recognition (Aluko, 1981). Nigeria rapidly established 11 foreign missions to minimize friction with other states and assert its presence. This diplomatic engagement was seen as key to promoting cooperation and peace, both within Africa and globally, serving also as tools for economic and administrative collaboration (Akinyemi, 2003). Nigeria's first Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, stressed the importance of strong overseas representation as a reflection of the country's foreign policy and global standing (Akinterinwa, 2010). Thus, Nigeria's foreign service is not merely symbolic but a critical element in securing international recognition, fostering development, and asserting its position on the world stage.

Nigeria's foreign service has evolved significantly since its independence in 1960, established even earlier in 1957 by the Tafawa Balewa-led federal government to prepare the nation for foreign representation. The External Affairs division initially operated under the Prime Minister's office, supervised by a British colonial official (Ajayi, 1995). The recruitment of pioneer staff began between 1957 and 1958, a process handled meticulously by various public service commissions. Pioneer officers were selected based on criteria like education, civil service training, and language proficiency. They received training at Nigerian offices abroad and even in British missions in various countries, with emphasis placed on gaining overseas experience and language skills (Saliu, 2006). This division later became the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Commonwealth Relations (MFA) in 1960.

Despite national policies advocating gender inclusion, women remain significantly underrepresented in Nigeria's historically male-dominated Foreign Service. This persistent disparity is a critical research problem because it hinders diverse perspectives in decision-making, weakens Nigeria's commitment to gender equity in governance, and ultimately impacts the nation's diplomatic effectiveness and global reputation on gender parity. Women's active involvement in politics is not merely an issue of equality, but is absolutely vital for the development and humanization of society, enhancing democracy and ensuring broader representation and better societal outcomes. Yet, traditional societal views, which deem qualities associated with women as incompatible with professional life, combined with the expectation for women to primarily manage household and childcare duties, create significant tension with career ambitions and lead to "invisible hands" stifling women's participation and advancement in the diplomatic service.

Recognizing this critical gap, this research serves as a comprehensive advisory resource for policymakers at local and national levels, as well as for officials within the Foreign Service and those involved in multilateral strategic planning. It aims to make a meaningful contribution to existing literature on diplomatic services and gender dynamics in foreign diplomacy¹⁰. This study specifically investigates women's involvement in Nigeria's Foreign Service through a comparative analysis of the administrations of President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007) and President Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2023). The selection of

Obasanjo's tenure is due to its notable achievements in increasing women's representation in Nigeria's public service, marking a transformative phase in efforts toward gender inclusivity. Conversely, Buhari's administration provides a vital comparison, as the decade between these two periods offers a historically relevant timeframe to examine changes and continuities in women's participation within Nigeria's diplomatic and public institutions, providing a comprehensive understanding of progress and persistent challenges.

To address these concerns, this study is guided by the following objectives:

- To trace the historical antecedents of women's participation in Nigeria's Foreign Service.
- To analyze how national gender frameworks have impacted women's participation in Nigeria's Foreign Service.
- To compare the effectiveness of both the Obasanjo and Buhari administrations in promoting women's roles in Nigerian Foreign Service, highlighting their successes and challenges.
- To identify the challenges that have obstructed the active occupation of sensitive offices by women in Nigeria's Foreign Service.
- To recommend panaceas for active women involvement in Nigeria's Foreign Service in succeeding government administrations.

Methodologically, this study employed a historical research approach, gathering data through semi-structured interviews with five selected participants, including retired and serving foreign service officers, individuals from the Ministry of Women Affairs, and scholars of Nigerian foreign policy. This was complemented by document analysis of government records, gender policy documents, and institutional reports. Data underwent verbatim transcription and content analysis to identify key themes and patterns.

Theoretical Lens: Understanding the Barriers

The theoretical framework employed in this study, comprising Liberal Feminism and Role Congruity Theory, is explicitly linked to the empirical data throughout the paper to explain the persistent underrepresentation of women in Nigeria's Foreign Service.

Liberal Feminism, this theory advocates for individual freedom, equal opportunities, and rights for all, including women in diplomacy, through reforms that establish equal opportunities and dismantle traditional gender roles. The empirical data shows that Nigeria, under President Obasanjo, adopted national policies like the National Policy on Women (2000) and the National Gender Policy (2006). These policies, particularly the 2006 one, signaled a commitment to gender inclusion and aimed for a 35% affirmative action quota for women in political appointments (Adeniran, 2020). This directly aligns with the liberal feminist ideal of promoting equality through formal policy and merit-based appointments. Indeed, the study notes incremental progress and an increase in female ambassadorial and senior roles under Obasanjo, such as the appointments of Professor Joy Ogwu and Ambassador Judith Attah. The establishment of NIDCOM, led by a woman under Buhari, also reflects a symbolic step towards increased visibility.

Despite these policy initiatives and notable appointments, the empirical data consistently reveals that overall female ambassadorial representation remained low (10-15%) under both administrations, falling far short of the 35% target. This significant gap highlights a critique of Liberal Feminism: that focusing solely on legal and policy reforms may not adequately challenge deeper systemic patriarchy and structural inequality. The persistence of "invisible hands" stifling women's participation despite these policies underscores that formal equality, while a start, was insufficient to dismantle ingrained barriers.

Role Congruity Theory, this theory posits that prejudice against women in leadership roles stems from an incongruity between the female gender role (associated with communal qualities) and leadership roles (associated with "agentic" qualities like assertiveness). This leads to women being perceived as having less leadership potential and facing more obstacles. The empirical data provides strong support for this theory. The study details how traditional societal views have long deemed qualities associated with women as "incompatible with the competitive, tough demands of professional life" (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The expectation that women bear primary responsibility for household and childcare duties creates a perceived tension with demanding diplomatic careers, leading to assumptions that women cannot manage demanding assignments. These deeply ingrained cultural norms directly feed into the perceived incongruity between being a woman and being an effective leader in a "masculine" field like foreign service.

The data highlights "workplace discrimination and institutional biases," including a "glass ceiling" where women face slower career progression and are "often overlooked for ambassadorial or high-level policy roles". Gendered assumptions, such as women lacking the "toughness for high-stakes negotiations," persisted. Furthermore, women were often assigned to "less strategic missions". These findings align with Role Congruity Theory's prediction that prejudice results in greater difficulty for women gaining access to and succeeding in leadership roles, even if their behavior is identical to a man'. The exclusion of women from "male-dominated networks" where "critical decisions were often made" and political gatekeeping further demonstrate how the perceived incongruity leads to women being sidelined or excluded from influential circles. While work-life balance issues are practical challenges, the empirical data shows that male colleagues often assumed women could not manage demanding assignments due to family responsibilities. This directly connects to the theory's premise about how perceived gender roles influence evaluations of women's leadership potential. The recurring theme of "invisible hands" stifling women's participation and advancement in the diplomatic service perfectly encapsulates the subtle, cumulative biases that Role Congruity Theory suggests can lead to significant gender gaps over time.

In conclusion, while Liberal Feminism helps frame the policy efforts and some incremental gains, Role Congruity Theory provides crucial insights into why these policy efforts fall short, by explaining the deep-seated biases and societal expectations that continue to hinder women's advancement in Nigeria's Foreign Service, even when formally qualified.

The empirical data consistently illustrates how these theoretical underpinnings manifest in real-world challenges faced by Nigerian women in diplomacy.

Historical Analysis (pre-1999)

Before 1999, women's involvement in Nigeria's Foreign Service was limited and largely marginal, mirroring broader gender disparities within governance and public service. The Foreign Service, established in 1957 and modelled after the British system, was overwhelmingly male-dominated from its inception, influenced by deep-seated patriarchal norms and institutional biases. Opportunities for women in diplomacy were significantly constrained by societal views that deemed qualities traditionally associated with women, such as gentleness and sensitivity, incompatible with the demanding nature of professional life, alongside the expectation that women primarily bear household and childcare duties. Consequently, women were typically employed in support roles like secretarial, clerical, or administrative positions within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with their participation in high-level diplomacy being nearly non-existent. Despite this male dominance, there were a few exceptions, such as Ambassador Judith Attah, who joined the Foreign Service in the early 1960s and became one of the first Nigerian women appointed as ambassador, serving in Italy and Austria. However, throughout the First Republic (1960–1966) and subsequent military regimes up to the 1990s, gender inclusivity in foreign policy received little attention, and diplomacy was largely regarded as a male preserve.

While the 1980s and 1990s saw increasing global awareness of gender equity, influenced by international movements like the UN Decade for Women and the 1995 Beijing Conference, these only slowly began to influence Nigerian discourse. By 1999, women's presence in the Foreign Service remained limited both numerically and in policy influence, with ambassadorial appointments being rare. This historical context of significant male dominance and persistent barriers underscores the importance of the comparative analysis of the Obasanjo (1999–2007) and Buhari (2015–2023) administrations, which marked a departure, however modest, from this prolonged period of near-total male control.

The Obasanjo Administration (1999–2007): Early Strides and Persistent Barriers

President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration (1999–2007) marked Nigeria's return to democratic governance after nearly 16 years of military rule. His tenure focused on national rebuilding, economic reforms, and reintegrating Nigeria into the international system, aiming to restore the country's image abroad (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2008). Key economic reforms included efforts to revitalize the economy through initiatives like the Economic Reforms and Governance Project (ERGP) and privatization, although poverty and unemployment remained significant challenges (Okonjo-Iweala, 2012). While his administration made strides in democratic governance, it faced criticism regarding corruption and the controversial attempt to seek a third term (Suberu, 2007).

During this period, efforts were made to reform Nigeria's foreign service, including initiatives that indirectly promoted gender inclusion. Although the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs (MFA) lacked a comprehensive gender mainstreaming strategy, broader governance reforms and international commitments spurred incremental improvements in women's representation (Mama, 2009). A key development was the adoption of the National Policy on Women (2000) and its successor, the National Gender Policy (2006). The 2006 policy notably advocated for a 35% affirmative action quota for women in political appointments, although these policies were not legally binding (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2006). Under Obasanjo's civil service reform program, merit-based appointments were promoted, which incidentally benefited female diplomats by reducing the influence of patronage in diplomatic postings (Ojo, 2012). This led to an increased number of women being considered for high-level postings, moving beyond lower-ranking or administrative roles. Nigeria's commitment to global gender inclusion frameworks, like the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the ratification of the Maputo Protocol (2003), also played a role (UNECA, 2009; AU, 2003). Nigeria's foreign policy emphasis on regional peacekeeping and conflict resolution, aligning with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), provided avenues for female diplomats to take on more substantive roles (UN Women, 2015).

Representation of Women in senior diplomatic positions saw an increase under Obasanjo compared to the period before 1999. While women were largely confined to mid-level or administrative roles previously, his tenure saw more women appointed as ambassadors, high commissioners, and senior officials within the MFA (Adeleke, 2020). However, their overall representation remained low, accounting for only about 10–15% of ambassadorial postings, falling short of the 35% affirmative action target (Oloyede, 2016). Beyond ambassadorial roles, women gained prominence in strategic policy roles within the MFA and Nigeria's international engagements, being assigned to influential directorates and increasingly appointed as special envoys, negotiators, and representatives in peace and security matters, including in peacekeeping operations in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan (Adebayo, 2018).

Key female appointments and contributions during this era included:

Professor Joy U. Ogwu, appointed Nigeria's Permanent Representative to the UN in 2006, is a distinguished academic and foreign policy expert. She played a key role in advocating for African interests in global governance, peacekeeping, and conflict resolution, aligning with UNSCR 1325 principles. She was actively involved in negotiations regarding UN missions in Liberia, Sudan, and Sierra Leone and advocated for increased African representation in UN decision-making bodies (United Nations, 2006; Ogwu, 2012).

Ambassador Judith Attah, held several ambassadorial positions, serving in Europe and Africa. She strengthened bilateral relations and focused on trade, security, and international cooperation. An advocate for gender equality within the diplomatic corps, she supported mentorship for younger female diplomats and contributed to ECOWAS peace initiatives in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Ajayi, 2015; MFA Nigeria, 2009).

Ambassador Esther Audu served in key foreign missions and was instrumental in fostering relations with major global players, particularly in Asia and the Middle East. She contributed

to diplomatic negotiations and multilateral engagements focused on economic cooperation and foreign direct investment (MFA Nigeria, 2009).

Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, though not a career diplomat, significantly impacted Nigeria's economic diplomacy during her tenure as Minister of Finance (2003–2006). Her leadership in negotiating the \$18 billion Paris Club debt cancellation in 2005 positioned her as a key figure in international economic relations and reinforced Nigeria's foreign policy agenda (Okonjo-Iweala, 2012).

Dr. Oby Ezekwesili, also played a pivotal role in international economic diplomacy. As Minister of Solid Minerals (2005–2006) and later of Education (2006–2007), she implemented reforms with international implications and championed global education policies and transparency initiatives. She later served as Vice President for Africa at the World Bank (Ezekwesili, 2007; World Bank, 2012).

Despite these positive developments, significant challenges hindered women's participation and advancement under Obasanjo. Cultural resistance and gender biases remained major barriers. Nigerian society, shaped by deep-seated patriarchal traditions, continued to view diplomacy as a male-dominated field. Challenges included:

- Expectations that women prioritize domestic and family responsibilities over professional ambitions, especially roles requiring extensive travel or long absences, have historically limited their participation in diplomacy (Aina, 2012; Nwankwo, 2021).
- The "glass ceiling" in promotions meant slower career progression for women, who were often overlooked for ambassadorial or high-level policy roles. Gendered assumptions, such as women lacking the toughness for high-stakes negotiations, persisted within diplomatic institutions (Olojede, 2009; UN Women, 2019).
- Critical decisions were often made in informal settings where women were excluded, limiting their influence and visibility (Okome, 2013).
- The demanding nature of diplomatic roles—including travel, long hours, and relocations—made balancing personal and family responsibilities difficult. Frequent postings disrupted family life, requiring women to either relocate families or face separation. Spousal support was often limited, with some husbands reluctant to support wives' postings or relocate. This led to long-distance marriages and, in some cases, marital breakdowns. Mothers faced challenges juggling parenting with duties, often with inadequate childcare support and insufficient maternity leave policies. These realities often led male colleagues to assume women could not manage demanding assignments (British Council Nigeria, 2012; Adebayo & Akinyemi, 2020).
- In some conservative host countries, female diplomats faced additional challenges navigating both Nigerian and local gender expectations. Some cultures resisted engaging with women in high-level negotiations, thereby compounding the obstacles to effective diplomatic engagement (Akinrinade, 2015; Eze, 2014).

Obasanjo's administration saw modest progress in women's representation in Nigeria's foreign service, driven by national policies and international commitments. However, deep-rooted cultural biases, institutional barriers, and work-life balance difficulties significantly limited their full integration and advancement, especially in senior roles. The absence of gender-sensitive training and reliance on presidential discretion for appointments meant progress was not fully sustained.

The Buhari Administration (2015-2023): Symbolic Gains and Persistent Challenges

President Muhammadu Buhari's administration (2015–2023) focused on tackling challenges in security, economy, and corruption. His foreign policy was driven by national interests, employing shuttle diplomacy to promote the economy and attract foreign direct investment. Key priorities included maintaining relations with neighbors, combating the Boko Haram insurgency through international cooperation (e.g., the Multinational Joint Task Force [MNJTF]), and pursuing economic diplomacy (Saliu & Aremu, 2018; Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2020). Nigeria maintained over 100 diplomatic missions globally under his administration, although many faced funding constraints and inadequate coordination (Akinboye, 2022).

Under Buhari, women in Nigeria's foreign service made notable contributions, but their representation, especially in senior roles, remained relatively low. While the administration operated under the National Gender Policy (2006), it did not significantly reform institutional frameworks within the foreign service to promote gender inclusion (British Council Nigeria, 2012; Nwankwo, 2021). Instead, it relied more on high-profile appointments of individual women, often symbolic, without accompanying structural policies for gender balance in recruitment, deployment, or promotions (Eze, 2020). A notable innovation was the establishment of the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM) in 2019, led by Hon. Abike Dabiri-Erewa. While this enhanced the visibility of women in foreign affairs, NIDCOM remained outside the core Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), limiting its influence on mainstream foreign policy (Oche, 2021). The MFA retained its traditional departmental structure and did not introduce gender desks or institutional focal points for gender equity (Olojede, 2009).

In terms of representation in senior diplomatic positions, Buhari's administration saw modest improvements. In 2021, only 11 of 95 ambassadors appointed were women just 11.5% well below the 35% affirmative action target set by the National Gender Policy (Nwankwo, 2021; UN Women, 2019). Though some women held strategic policy and multilateral diplomacy roles, these appointments were exceptions. Most women's roles in peace and security diplomacy remained advisory rather than decision-making, perpetuating the institutional gender gap (Adebayo & Akinyemi, 2020). Compared to Rwanda, South Africa, and Ghana countries that achieved greater gender parity in diplomacy Nigeria under Buhari lagged behind. For instance, Rwanda had over 50% female ambassadors by 2020, while Nigeria struggled to exceed 12% (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2020).

Notable female appointments and contributions during Buhari's administration included:

Dr. Uzoma Ikechi Emenike: Became Nigeria's first female Ambassador to the United States in 2021, a significant milestone. A seasoned diplomat, she previously served as Ambassador to Ireland and Iceland. In the US, she focused on strengthening Nigeria-US relations, engaging officials, clarifying Nigeria's positions, and implementing reforms to improve consular services, including prioritizing the welfare of Nigerian citizens.

Ambassador Vivian N.R. Okeke: Served as Ambassador to Austria and Permanent Representative to the UN Office in Vienna (2017-2020), a critical multilateral hub. She was Nigeria's chief delegate to the IAEA, advancing nuclear diplomacy, advocating for peaceful use of nuclear technology, and supporting Nigeria's technical cooperation and security efforts. She also represented Nigeria at the CTBTO, advocating for its entry into force and highlighting science's role in disarmament. At the UNODC, she contributed to efforts against organized crime, drug trafficking, and corruption, advocating for international cooperation and technical assistance for Nigeria's anti-corruption agenda and criminal justice system, particularly in response to Boko Haram and human trafficking. She also worked to deepen bilateral relations with Austria and prioritized diaspora affairs.

Ambassador Lilian Onoh: Served as High Commissioner to Namibia (2017-2020). She supported the promotion of indigenous Nigerian languages among the diaspora, reinforced cordial relations between Nigeria and Namibia, and was a staunch advocate for the rights and welfare of Nigerian citizens in Namibia, implementing a policy of reciprocity regarding visas in response to mistreatment incidents.

Ambassador Ijeoma Chinonyerem Obiezu: Served as Ambassador to the Republic of Ireland and Iceland, appointed during Buhari's administration. She notably organized the maiden Nigeria-Ireland Trade and Investment Summit (NITIS) in 2022 to foster economic collaboration. She actively strengthened bilateral relations with Iceland and promoted Nigerian culture and engaged with the diaspora in Ireland.

Ambassador Dr. Eniola Olaitan Ajayi: Served as Ambassador to Hungary (2017-2021) with concurrent accreditations, later appointed Ambassador to the Netherlands and Permanent Representative to the OPCW (2021). In Hungary, she facilitated the establishment of the Nigerian-Hungarian Chamber of Commerce to enhance trade and investment, secured additional scholarship opportunities for Nigerian students, and led the embassy to be recognized for its efficient consular services. She also promoted cultural exchange and prioritized the welfare of the Nigerian diaspora.

Despite these achievements, women in Nigeria's foreign service continued to face significant and often persistent obstacles under Buhari. These barriers stemmed from political gatekeeping, socio-cultural biases, religious conservatism, institutional inertia, and inadequate policy implementation. Key challenges included:

- The foreign service is not immune to political patronage, which often sidelines women. Appointments are influenced by party loyalty, ethno-regional calculations, and gender stereotypes (Adebayo, 2019; Okafor & Akinkugbe, 2021). The lack of legislation mandating gender quotas leaves women vulnerable to exclusion.

Navigating Nigeria's male-dominated political environment and nomination processes is difficult for women (Eze, 2020).

- These reinforce the belief that leadership is for men, sometimes clashing with gender inclusion advocacy, particularly concerning sensitive or strategic diplomatic postings (Nwankwo, 2018). Patriarchal interpretations within political circles often restrict women's ambitions (Ojo, 2022).
- Despite merit-based promotion systems, the old boys' network and informal patronage hinder qualified women from advancing (Afolabi & Hassan, 2020). Gender-blind policies fail to consider unique barriers like maternity leave or postings in challenging areas. Women are often assigned to less strategic missions while high-value postings remain predominantly male (Uche, 2017).
- The National Gender Policy recommending 35% representation was poorly implemented; for instance, the 2015 cabinet had only 16.7% women ministers, a regression from a previous administration (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2016). No major structural changes were introduced in the MFA to promote women's representation (Ogunyemi, 2019).
- Media often reinforces gender stereotypes, scrutinizing female leaders based on appearance or marital status rather than qualifications, undermining public confidence and discouraging young women from pursuing diplomatic careers (Abubakar & Sanni, 2021). The demanding nature of the foreign service, including work-life balance issues, while extensively discussed in the context of the Obasanjo era, is inherent to the profession and likely remained a significant challenge under Buhari (Chukwuemeka, 2020).

In conclusion, the Buhari administration saw marginal improvements in women's representation, marked by several high-profile appointments. However, these gains were more symbolic than systemic, as enduring barriers political, cultural, religious, and institutional coupled with weak policy implementation, continued to limit women's advancement.

Comparative Analysis: Varying Degrees of Commitment and Persistent Issues

Despite the theoretical continuity of policies advocating for gender inclusion, such as the National Gender Policy (2006) which notably proposed a 35% affirmative action quota for women in political appointments, structural reforms in Nigeria's Foreign Service largely stagnated post-2007, particularly under the Buhari administration (2015-2023). The reasons for this stagnation, despite policy continuity from Obasanjo's era into Buhari's, are multi-faceted.

The National Gender Policy, while a significant recognition of the need for women's inclusion, was not legally binding, and its implementation regarding diplomatic appointments was weak. For instance, the 2015 cabinet under Buhari had only 16.7% women ministers, a regression from a previous administration, highlighting poor overall implementation. Under the Buhari administration, gains in women's representation were

often symbolic rather than systemic. While there were notable high-profile individual female appointments, such as Ambassador Uzoma Emenike becoming Nigeria's first female Ambassador to the United States, these appointments were not accompanied by corresponding structural policies for gender balance in recruitment, deployment, or promotions within the Foreign Service. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) largely retained its traditional departmental structure and did not introduce specific gender desks or institutional focal points for gender equity. The absence of formal institutional mechanisms and gender-sensitive training programmes meant that any progress was not fully embedded or sustained beyond individual political will.

The systemic barriers identified under Obasanjo's administration continued to hinder significant female advancement and remained largely unaddressed or inadequately tackled. Appointments were frequently influenced by party loyalty, ethno-regional calculations, and gender stereotypes, often sidelining qualified women. The lack of legislation mandating gender quotas left women vulnerable to exclusion in a male-dominated political environment. Deep-seated patriarchal norms and institutional biases continued to perceive diplomacy, especially high-stakes or strategic diplomatic postings, as a male preserve. Traditional societal views often deemed qualities associated with women as incompatible with demanding professional life, compounded by expectations of women bearing primary household and childcare duties. Despite merit-based promotion systems, the "old boys' network" and informal patronage continued to hinder qualified women from advancing. Gender-blind policies often failed to consider unique barriers faced by women, and women were frequently assigned to less strategic missions, while high-value postings remained predominantly male. The inherent demanding nature of diplomatic roles – involving extensive travel, long hours, and frequent relocations continued to create significant tension with personal and family responsibilities, disproportionately affecting women due to societal expectations and often limited spousal or institutional support. Media sometimes reinforced gender stereotypes, scrutinizing female leaders based on appearance or marital status rather than qualifications, which could undermine public confidence and discourage young women from pursuing diplomatic careers.

To conceptualize Nigeria's performance in achieving gender parity in diplomacy, a brief comparison with other African states reveals its relative stagnation. While Nigeria struggled to exceed 12% female ambassadorial representation even under Buhari's administration, countries like Rwanda had achieved over 50% female ambassadors by 2020. Similarly, South Africa and Ghana had also achieved greater gender parity in diplomacy. This stark contrast highlights that despite having a National Gender Policy, Nigeria under both Obasanjo and Buhari lagged significantly behind some of its African peers in translating policy recognition into meaningful and systemic gender inclusion within its Foreign Service. The persistent barriers can be understood through theoretical frameworks such as Liberal Feminism and Role Congruity Theory. While Liberal Feminism advocates for equal opportunities and legal reforms, the Nigerian context demonstrates that legal and policy frameworks alone are insufficient without addressing the underlying societal biases and

institutional inertias illuminated by Role Congruity Theory. The perception of diplomatic leadership roles as inherently masculine continues to create prejudice and hinder women's advancement, despite their qualifications.

Here is a summary table comparing trends in female ambassadorial appointments across the administrations of Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari, drawing on the information from the sources:

Female Ambassadorial Appointments: A Comparative Overview

Administration	Tenure	Female Ambassadorial Representation	National Gender Policy Target	Key Characteristics of Appointments
Olusegun Obasanjo	1999–2007	10–15%	35%	Incremental progress with an increase in female appointments to ambassadorial and senior roles, including notable figures like Professor Joy Ogwu and Ambassador Judith Attah. Driven by national policies (National Policy on Women 2000, National Gender Policy 2006) and merit-based appointments.
Muhammadu Buhari	2015–2023	Around 11.5% (e.g., 11 of 95 ambassadors appointed in 2021)	35%	Notable high-profile female appointments, such as Ambassador Uzoma Emenike (first female Ambassador to the US). However, overall female ambassadorial representation remained low, often described as symbolic gains rather than systemic change, with weak policy implementation.

Conclusion: The Unfulfilled Goal of Gender Equity in Diplomacy

Nigeria's Foreign Service, a critical arm of its national development and global engagement, has historically been a male-dominated domain (Adebayo, 2019; Uche, 2017). While Nigerian women have consistently demonstrated competence and made significant contributions to diplomacy, their journey towards equitable representation and advancement, particularly in leadership roles, has been arduous (Eze, 2020; Nwankwo, 2018). The administrations of Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari marked distinct but connected phases in this journey. Obasanjo's tenure saw the introduction of national gender policies and incremental increases in women's presence in senior diplomatic roles, providing a departure from the near-total male dominance of the

past (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2006; Olojede, 2011). Key appointments and contributions by women like Joy Ogwu, Judith Attah, and Esther Audu showcased female capability in diplomacy (Okafor & Akinkugbe, 2021; Ogunyemi, 2019). Buhari's administration continued this trajectory with high-profile appointments, notably the first female Ambassador to the US, Uzoma Emenike. Other ambassadors like Vivian Okeke, Lilian Onoh, Ijeoma Obiezu, and Eniola Ajayi also made significant marks (Abubakar & Sanni, 2021; Ojo, 2022).

However, the progress under both administrations was limited and often described as symbolic rather than indicative of systemic change (Afolabi & Hassan, 2020). Despite policies advocating for increased female representation, the actual proportion of women in ambassadorial positions remained persistently low, hovering around 10–15%, far below the 35% national target (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2016; UN Women, 2021). The sources reveal that deep-rooted cultural and religious biases, patriarchal institutional practices, political gatekeeping, informal networks, and inadequate policy implementation remained formidable obstacles (Nwankwo, 2018; Ojo, 2022). Furthermore, the inherent demands of diplomatic life, presenting significant work-life balance challenges related to travel, relocation, family responsibilities, and spousal support, disproportionately affected women (Chukwuemeka, 2020; Eze, 2020).

The theories of Liberal Feminism and Role Congruity help explain these persistent barriers. While Liberal Feminism highlights the need for equal opportunities and legal reforms, the sources demonstrate that without addressing underlying societal biases and institutional inertias illuminated by Role Congruity Theory's concept of prejudice stemming from perceived incompatibility between female gender roles and leadership legal and policy frameworks alone are insufficient (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Olojede, 2011). The perception of diplomatic leadership roles as inherently masculine continues to create bias against women (Abubakar & Sanni, 2021; Ogunyemi, 2019).

The study aims to identify these challenges and propose potential solutions for active women involvement in Nigeria's Foreign Service in succeeding administrations. Addressing this imbalance is crucial not just for gender equity, but for incorporating diverse perspectives in decision-making, enhancing Nigeria's diplomatic effectiveness, and strengthening its global reputation on gender parity. Overcoming the invisible hands that stifle women's advancement requires institutional reforms, a challenge to cultural norms, stronger policy implementation, and robust support systems to ensure that qualified women can fully contribute to representing Nigeria on the world stage.

Recommendations

To address the persistent challenges and foster greater gender inclusion in Nigeria's Foreign Service, a multi-pronged approach targeting key actors and leveraging innovative strategies is essential:

For the Federal Government:

- The Federal Government should work towards making the 35% affirmative action quota in the National Gender Policy (2006) legally binding for all public appointments, including diplomatic roles. This would ensure that gender balance is not merely discretionary but an enforceable mandate, moving beyond symbolic gestures.
- Demonstrate unwavering political will to enforce gender parity, ensuring that appointments are merit-based and systematically inclusive, rather than reliant on individual high-profile appointments.
- Actively engage in comparative South-South partnerships with African nations like Rwanda, South Africa, and Ghana that have successfully achieved higher rates of female representation in diplomacy. This involves studying their policy frameworks, institutional reforms, and best practices in recruitment, training, and retention of female diplomats to inform Nigeria's strategies.

For the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA):

- Establish dedicated Gender Desks or Focal Points within the MFA departments to actively champion gender equity in all foreign service operations, including recruitment, training, deployment, and promotion.
- Develop and implement mandatory gender-sensitive training programmes for all staff, particularly those in leadership and human resources roles, to address unconscious biases and promote inclusive leadership styles.
- Review and reform recruitment, deployment, and promotion processes to ensure transparency and eliminate inherent biases and the influence of "old boys' networks". Ensure women are assigned to strategic missions and high-value postings, moving beyond traditional gendered assignments.

By implementing these structured recommendations, Nigeria can move beyond symbolic gains to achieve substantive and systemic gender inclusion in its Foreign Service, enhancing its diplomatic effectiveness and global reputation for gender parity.

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