

ARTICLE

Gender and Lawmaking in Nigeria: Assessing Female-Responsive Legislation in the National Assembly, 1999–2023



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Abstract

This study examines the extent to which legislative trends in Nigeria's National Assembly from 1999 to 2023 reflect responsiveness to women's issues. Using desk-based research, it analyses 9,788 proposed bills and 2,530 passed bills across both chambers. Findings reveal low, unstable, and divergent levels of female responsiveness: only 1.98% of proposed bills and 2.83% of passed bills were substantively female-responsive. Key constraints include entrenched socio-historical inequalities, failure to satisfy legislative review requirements, and limited commitment by sponsors to lobby and mobilise support. The study recommends increased female representation and targeted capacity-building in legislative advocacy and strategic lobbying.

Keywords – Representation, Parliament, Bills, Lawmaking, Female-Responsive.

I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, parliament holds a significant position of authority among all other state institutions as the primary institution best suited to portray inclusive representation. This institution is responsible for overseeing policy actions and budget allocations to ensure that policies addressing the interests of citizens across all sectors are in place. Ideally, parliaments are to mirror the broader population of the society they are elected to represent, by resembling different demographics and identities¹ especially in a modern democratic system. Nonetheless, this powerful institution has a common record of unequal gender representation in almost all countries of Africa and other continents, including Nigeria².

In recent times, Nigeria has ranked among the bottom five countries and has the lowest representation of women in sub-Saharan Africa³ With over twenty years of uninterrupted democratic governance, Nigeria still struggles with issues of women's marginalisation in the political realm, especially in the parliament, at both the national and sub-national levels. This ranking is exceptionally not appealing and raising a growing concern to many Nigerians as what could be the implication of this on promotion of legislations that exclusively address the needs of women and girls, such as prohibition of circumcision of girl child, maternal and child welfare health services, abolition of discrimination against women, sexual harassment in tertiary education institutions, gender and equal opportunity bills, amongst others. Notably, there is an increasing global recognition

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¹ Conti, G. (2019). *Parliament the mirror of the nation: Representation, deliberation, and democracy in Victorian Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² Iyeshim, M. (2023). Political inequality and women participation in parliament in selected African countries. *SADI International Journal of Social Science and Humanities*, 10(4), 27-41. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10259281>

³ Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (2024). Review of relevant information on Nigeria's democracy factsheet: Overview of 9th national assembly bills on women issues.

that such laws, particularly in areas such as political representation, reproductive rights, protection against gender-based violence, and economic empowerment, are crucial to achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5, which focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls by 2030.⁴

Interestingly, political representation studies have argued that the gender of legislators matters for their behaviour and performance in office. This suggests that women underrepresentation in parliament significantly affects the chances of introducing or passing bills in favour of the female gender⁵. It presupposes that female responsive policies and legislations that are paramount to women at the national, state and local government level, such as prohibition of circumcision of girl child, maternal and child welfare health services, abolition of discrimination against women, sexual harassment in tertiary education institutions, gender and equal opportunity bills, among others, can easily be attended to, only when active women are represented richly at the parliament to fly the bills.⁶

However, the literature submission is mixed. While some scholars⁷ have found a link between the proportion of women in parliament and passage of more bills on women issues, arguing that a significant consequence of excluding women from the political decision-making process is a lack of promotion of female responsive legislations. Other scholars⁸ argue that there is no correlation between the proportion of women in parliament and the promotion of policies that are responsive to women and girls.

Critically reviewing the varied discourses on women political representation, it suffices to contend that merely identifying the elements of descriptive representation, such as electing more

⁴ United Nations Human Rights (2014). Women's rights are human rights ISBN 978-92-1-154206-6 E-ISBN 978-92-1-056789.

⁵ Oloyede, O. (2016). Monitoring participation of women in politics in Nigeria. National Bureau of Statistics, 6. https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/Finland_Oct2016/Documents/Nigeria_paper.pdf.

⁶ Dan-Azumi, J. D., & Asan, C. (2021). Women and legislative representation in Nigeria's National Assembly: A detailed appraisal of the 8th Assembly (2015-2019). *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*, 11(2), 86109-86109.

⁷ Abbott, P. & Malunda, D. (2016). The promise and the reality: Women's rights in Rwanda: *African Journal of International and Comparative Law* 24.4 (2016): 561-581 Edinburgh University Press DOI: 10.3366/ajicl.2016.0173 © Edinburgh University Press www.euppublishing.com/loi/ajicl. Also see Akirav, O. (2020). Gender and parliamentary activity. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 79: 1-7.; Bauer, G. (2019). Women in African parliaments progress and prospects. *The Palgrave Handbook on African Women's Studies*, 1-18. Dan-Azumi, J. D., & Asan, C. (2021). Women and legislative representation in Nigeria's National Assembly: A detailed appraisal of the 8th Assembly (2015-2019). *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*, 11(2), 86109-86109; Eniola, B. O. (2018). Gender parity in parliament: A panacea for the promotion and protection of women's rights in Nigeria. *Front. Sociol.* 3(34). doi:10.3389/fsoc.2018.00034; Hinojosa, M. (2021) The descriptive representation of women in politics Encyclopedia <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1978>; Nwankwor, C. (2019). Women cabinet ministers' substantive representation in Africa. *Social Politics*, 0.0: 1-24; Oloyede, O. (2016). Monitoring participation of women in politics in Nigeria. National Bureau of Statistics, 6. https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/Finland_Oct2016/Documents/Nigeria_paper.pdf.

⁸ Krook, M. L. (2017). Violence against women in politics. *Journal of Democracy*, 28(1), 74-88. DOI: 10.1353/jod.2017.0006; Celis, K. & Erzeel, S. (2017). The complementarity advantage: parties, representativeness and newcomers' access to power. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 70, 43-61. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsv043>; Ndlovu, S. & Kurebwa, J. (2017). The critical mass theory and quota systems debate. *International Journal of Advanced Research and Publications*, 1(1) ISSN: 2456-9992

women to parliament, is insufficient for achieving women substantive representation, such as initiating and promoting legislations that address female issues. Examining the mechanisms through which substantive representation occurs is equally crucial to identify specific representatives based on factors beyond sex and gender. Therefore, concentrating analysis on the unique political dynamics of Nigeria's parliament, where there is low descriptive women representation in both national and sub-national parliaments, this research seeks to enrich political representation discourse by investigating if the proportion of women representation in parliament indicates a more effective or detrimental presentation of issues affecting women. It will provide a novel understanding of the notion that the exclusion of women in parliament translates to the exclusion of legislative decisions that focus on issues of concern to women and girls by examining the extent to which trends of bills in Nigeria's National Assembly from 1999-2023 reflect female responsiveness over the years.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a secondary quantitative research methodology, which entails the analysis of existing numerical data previously collected by researchers, institutions, or organisations. This approach was adopted because it permits objective examination of large datasets and facilitates trend analysis over time. The research design is descriptive with the aim of identifying patterns, trends, and statistical associations within the data. Data for this study were sourced from government databases, organizational reports, published repositories such as the National Assembly of Nigeria (NASS), National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies (NILDS), Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC). A purposive sampling technique was used to select the dataset based on its relevance to the research objective and the credibility of the source. Data analysis was carried out using Excel with descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and trend analysis. Since the study utilised desk-based data with no direct interaction with human participants, ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, appropriate acknowledgement was given to all original sources, and the data were solely for academic purposes.

III. RESULT

The legislative activities of the National Assembly in relation to bill processing and progression have been unsteady over the years. From 1999 - 2023, a total of 9788 bills have been introduced across both the Senate and House of Representatives. While the Senate introduced a total of 3883 bills, 5905 bills were introduced by the House of Representatives. Notably, 2530 out of the 9788 bills introduced across both houses from 1999-2023 were passed, 1062 of 3883 proposed by the Senate and 1468 of 5905 proposed by the House of Representatives.

Table 1: Trend of Bills Proposed and Passed in Nigeria's National Assembly (1999-2023)

Assembly	Proposed Bills			Passed Bills		
	House of Rep	Senate	Total	House of Rep	Senate	Total
1999-2003	325	250	575	103	64	167

2003-2007	343	446	789	168	129	297
2007-2011	503	477	980	152	72	224
2011-2015	792	615	1407	192	125	317
2015-2019	1674	815	2489	343	172	515
2019-2023	2268	1280	3548	510	500	1010
Total	5905	3883	9788	1468	1062	2530

Source: Author's Compilation with Data from *NILDS/NASS (2016)*, *PLAC (2019, 2024)*

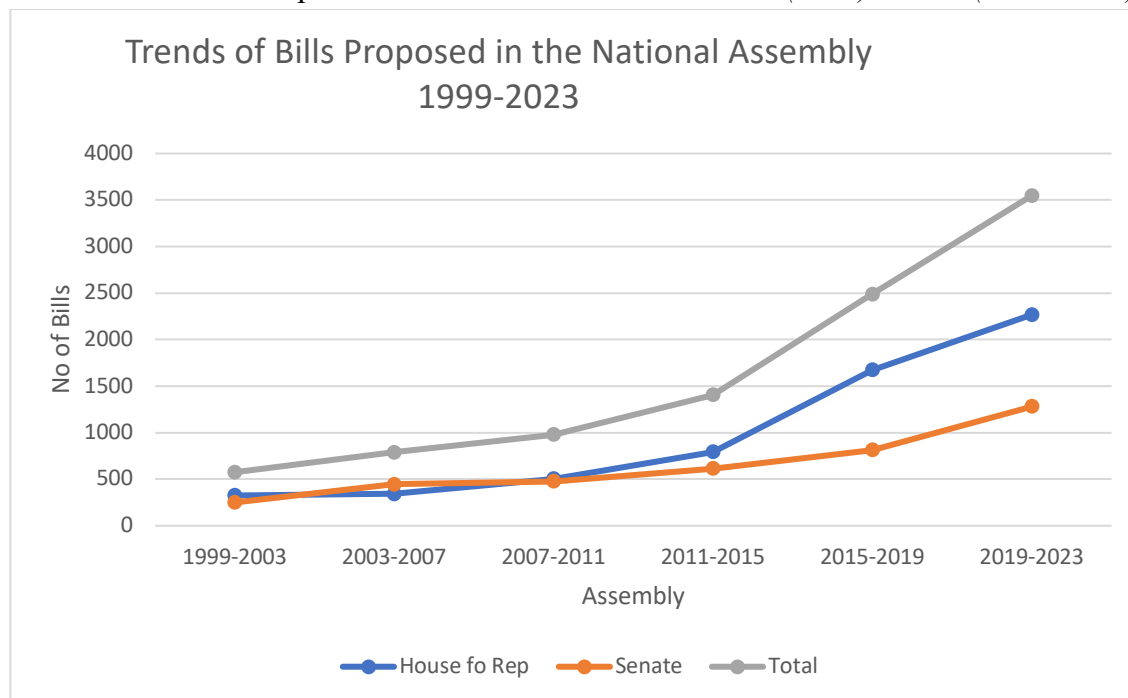


Figure 1: Trend of Bills Proposed in the National Assembly

Source: Author's Analysis

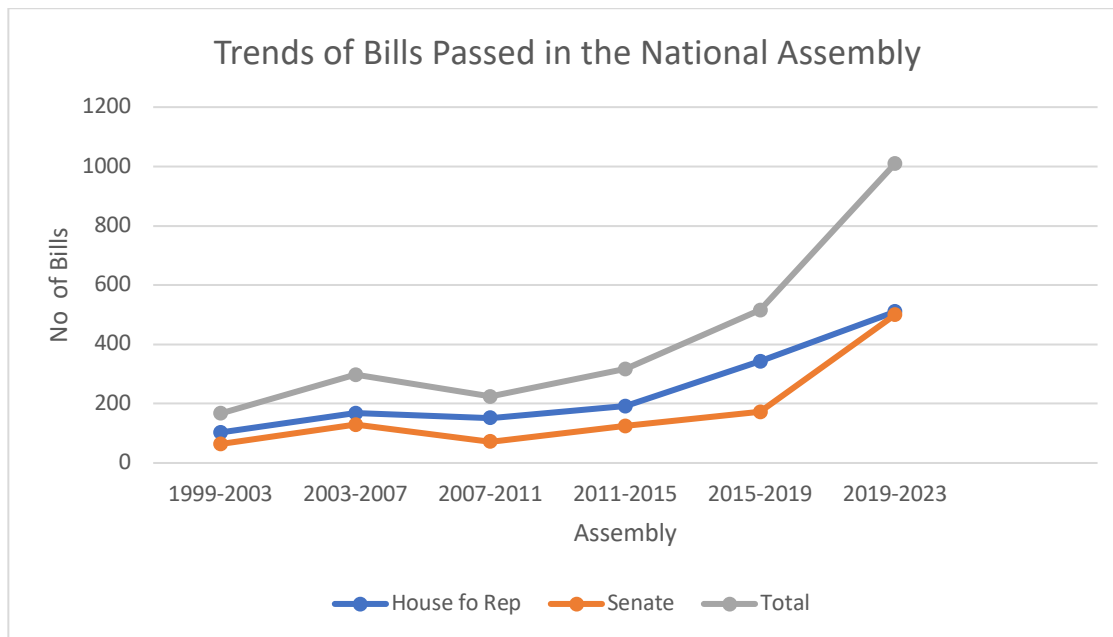


Figure 2: Trend of Bills Passed in the National Assembly

Source: Author's Analysis

Using keywords like “women” “girl” “widow” “equal opportunities” “education” “family health” “childcare” reproductive health” “sexual” “violence” “empowerment” and bills referred to women affairs committee to search among bill titles, a total of 194 female substantive bills were introduced across both houses between 1999-2023, of which 86 were proposed by the Senate and 108 by the House of Representatives. In the same vein, 43 out of the 194 female substantive bills introduced were passed, 14 of 86 proposed by the Senate and 29 of 108 proposed by the House of Representatives.

Table 2: Trends of Female Substantive Bills Proposed and Passed in Nigeria's National Assembly

Assembly	Proposed Female Substantive Bills			Passed Female Substantive Bills		
	House of Rep	Senate	Total	House of Rep	Senate	Total
1999-2003	5	9	14	5	1	6
2003-2007	2	6	8	2	1	3
2007-2011	20	15	35	4	2	6
2011-2015	23	22	45	6	5	11
2015-2019	29	18	47	4	2	6
2019-2023	29	16	45	8	3	11

Total	108	86	194	29	14	43
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Source: Author's Compilation with Data from *NILDS/NASS (2016)* and *PLAC (2019, 2024)*

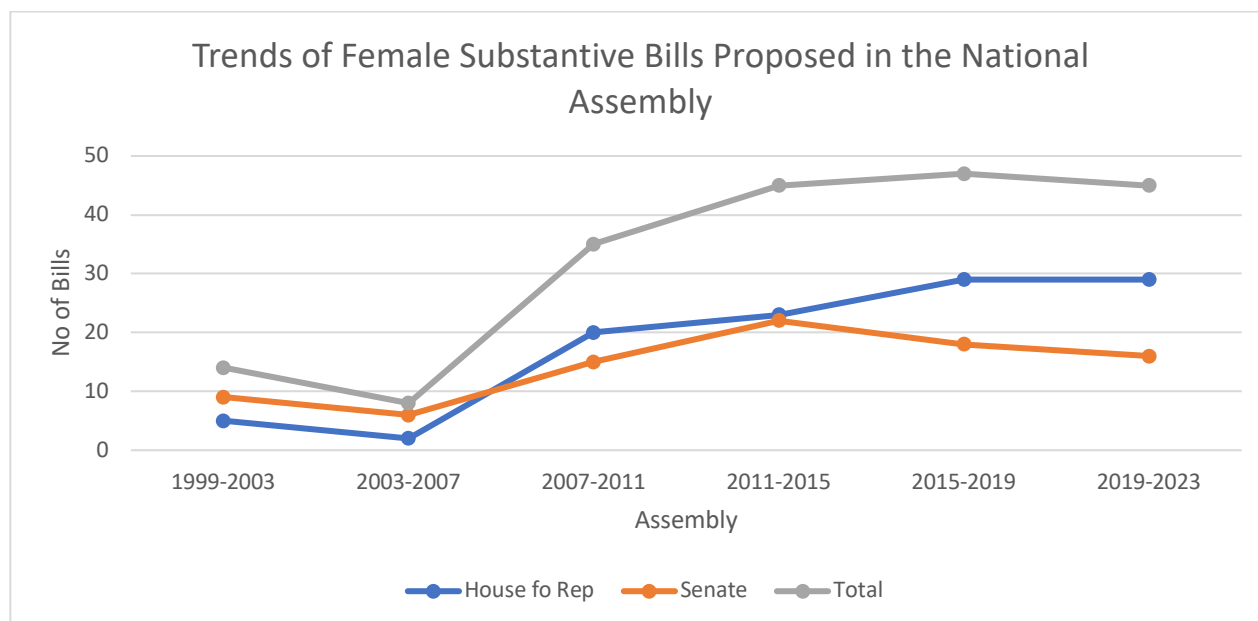


Figure 3: Trends of Female Substantive Bills Proposed in the National Assembly

Source: Author's Analysis

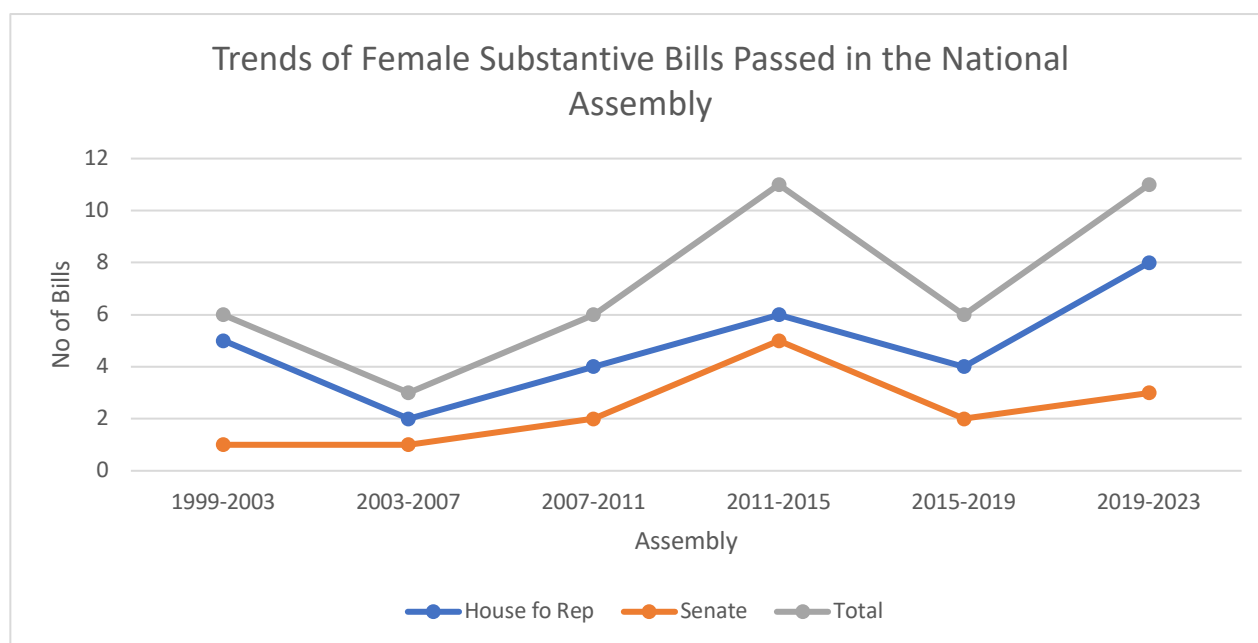


Figure 4: Trends of Female Substantive Bills Passed in the National Assembly

Source: Author's Analysis

Furthermore, result shows that of 9788 bills introduced across both the Senate and House of Representatives from 1999 - 2023, only 194 bills addressed female-related issues. The table below gives a vivid representation of the distribution of female substantive bills to the total number of bills

proposed from the fourth to the ninth Assembly. In the fourth Assembly (1999 -2003), female substantive bills accounted for only 2.43% of the proposed bills in the National Assembly, while in the fifth Assembly it was 1.04%. The sixth Assembly recorded the highest percentage (3.57%), followed by the seventh Assembly with 3.20%. While the eighth and ninth Assemblies recorded 1.89% and 1.27% respectively.

Table 3: Proportion of Bills Proposed to Female Substantive Bills Proposed in Nigeria's National Assembly

Assembly	Total No of NASS Proposed Bills	No of Female Substantive Bills	% of Female Substantive Bills
1999-2003	575	14	2.43
2003-2007	769	8	1.04
2007-2011	980	35	3.57
2011-2015	1407	45	3.20
2015-2019	2489	47	1.89
2019-2023	3548	45	1.27
Total	9788	194	1.98

Source: Author's Compilation with Data from *NILDS/NASS (2016) and PLAC (2019, 2024)*

In the same vein, the result revealed that only 43 out of 2530 bills passed across both Houses in the National Assembly from 1999 - 2023 reflect female responsiveness. In addition, the results of the analysis indicate that 3.59% of the total number of bills was passed in the fourth Assembly. Only 1.01 % of the bills passed in the fifth Assembly, and 2.68% in the sixth Assembly. About 3.47% in the seventh Assembly, while only 1.17% in the eighth Assembly. Also, only 1.09% of the total number of bills passed in the ninth Assembly reflects female responsiveness.

Table 4: Proportion of Bills Passed to Female Substantive Bills Passed in Nigeria's National Assembly

Assembly	Total No of NASS Passed Bills	No of Female Substantive Bills	% of Female Substantive Bills
1999-2003	167	6	3.59
2003-2007	297	3	1.01
2007-2011	224	6	2.68
2011-2015	317	11	3.47
2015-2019	515	6	1.17
2019-2023	1010	11	1.09
Total	2530	43	2.83

Source: Author's Compilation with Data from *NILDS/NASS (2016) and PLAC (2019, 2024)*

Considering the issue-focused of female substantive bills passed in Nigeria's National Assembly, five key areas were identified which are; political representation, economic empowerment, female protection/gender violence, health/reproductive rights, and amendment.

Table 5: Category of Female Substantive Bills Passed in Nigeria's National Assembly

Assembly	Political Representation	Economic Empowerment	Female Protection / Gender Violence	Health/ Reproductive Rights	Amendment
1999-2003	-	1	4	1	-
2003-2007	-	-	3	-	-
2007-2011	-	2	3	1	-
2011-2015	-	2	6	2	1
2015-2019	-	-	5	1	-
2019-2023	1	2	6	1	1

Source: Author's Compilation with Data from *NILDS/NASS (2016) and PLAC (2019, 2024)*

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Analysing the extent to which the trend of bills across both Houses in the Nigeria's National Assembly reflects female responsiveness from 1999-2023, the study discovered that out of 9788 bills proposed, only 1.98% were female substantive bills, while 2.83% of the 2530 bills passed were female responsive. Notably, the extent to which bills proposed and processed bills in the Nigeria's National Assembly reflect responsiveness to female issues is relatively low, as well as unstable and divergent among the Assemblies. For instance, the 4th Assembly proposed and passed 575 and 167 Bills respectively out of which 14 (2.43%) and 6 (3.59 %) were female responsive. Out of the 769 and 297 Bills proposed and passed by the 5th Assembly, 8 (1.04 %) and 3 (1.01%) reflected female responsiveness respectively. Also 35 (3.57 %) and 6 (2.68%) out of 980 and 224 Bills proposed and passed respectively across both Houses in the 6th Assembly were responsive to female issues, while 45 (3.20%) and 11(3.47%) of 1407 and 317 proposed and passed respectively in the 7th Assembly. In the 8th Assembly 47 (1.89%) and 6 (1.17%) of 2489 and 515 of Bills proposed and passed respectively were female responsive, while out of 3548 and 1010 Bills proposed and passed by the 9th Assembly, 45 (1.27%) and 11 (1.09%) reflected female responsiveness respectively.

However, the study further revealed that as with other bills, not all female substantive bills introduced survived the legislative review process. Only a few get through to the bill passage stage. The study probed further to identify the causal factors of this trend. Ingrained social and historical justice, failure of bills to meet the standards of the legislative review process and lack of will power of sponsors to follow up, lobby, and persuade other legislators to support such bills were advanced.

These findings align and echo Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) concerns regarding constraints such as party loyalty, institutional structures, or political agendas that prevent legislators from addressing women's issues. In such cases, increasing the number of women in office does not always translate into meaningful policy change that benefits women.

V. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the extent to which bills proposed and passed across both Houses in the National Assembly, reflect female responsiveness from 1999-2023 is relatively low, just as women descriptive representation is low. Only 1.98% and 2.83% of the bills proposed and passed across both houses respectively advanced the female agenda. However, beyond the level of women descriptive representation, some causal factors have been identified to be responsible for the extent to which bills in the Nigeria's national assembly reflect female responsiveness. Fundamentally, advocacy and awareness must be strategic and sustainable to promote more female-responsive legislations in Nigeria, aligning with the realities of the legislative review process. Advocates should anticipate long gestation periods for sensitive bills and devise ways to keep stakeholders vigilant and the public interested by clearly articulating how such bills would work, supported by relevant examples. Capacity building and support for female legislators on lawmaking and strategic lobbying are essential. Those championing bills on women's political representation and other female-responsive legislation should receive adequate backing to sustain advocacy throughout the Assembly's tenure and be well-prepared to defend the bill's contents.

Furthermore, adequate women representation in the parliament can contribute to advancing the inclusion of key policy issues affecting women, influence the range of policy issues and bills that are considered in legislative assemblies as well as the types of solutions that are proposed. Therefore, deliberate actions have to be taken by necessary actors to reverse the trend of low women representation in decision-making position, and this includes adopting policies to increase the numbers of women in parliaments to influence issues. With increased political will by the government and efforts by political parties, legislators, and civil society organisations, Nigeria can attain the requisite capacity to facilitate the required revolution for women, just like its counterparts in other jurisdictions. This way, the progress towards more inclusive representation and increased prioritisation of women's issues will be fast-tracked.