

Nigeria: The Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill and Democratic Deepening

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Introduction

I am deeply honoured to address you today at the SSAN 2024 Distinguished Public Lecture, where we will be discussing the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill (GEOB), an important legislation that was rejected by the 9th National Assembly in 2022. The choice of today's event, a few days after the anniversary of our political independence, adds significance to our discussion on the relevance and importance of the future of our country's socioeconomic and political development. No country with a genuine intent to drive and actualise the tenets of development and democracy should relegate a significant proportion of its population, especially after 64 years of independence. As we reflect on our journey since gaining independence in 1960, it is crucial to acknowledge the meaningful progress we have made and the challenges that persist, particularly concerning gender equality and the democratic process.

Since independence, Nigeria has traversed a complex path marked by political upheavals, economic fluctuations, and social transformations. Despite these challenges, we have managed to sustain a democratic framework that, though imperfect, provides a foundation upon which we can build a more inclusive and equitable society. These efforts reveal the gap of democratic deepening, viz: transforming citizens from passive to active members of society. This implies allowing citizens to recognise and enjoy their rights and advocate for the government's accountability beyond periodic elections.

Essentially, it is in this context that the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill (GEOB), becomes a legislative tool to actualise the agenda for an inclusive society. It is glaring that one problem that continues to impede our progress as a nation is gender inequality. Women, who constitute nearly half of our population, remain underrepresented in political and economic spheres. This disparity not only undermines the principles of democracy but also hinders our socioeconomic

development, which is the end goal of democracy. The significance of this Bill to Nigeria is crucial, as it aligns with the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)5, which supports Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. With the failure to meet the 2015 Millennium Development Goal 3 (promote gender equality and empower women), and the looming expiration of the SDGs in six years, there is an urgent need to implement the GEOB and capitalise on its provisions within this timeframe.

Though the current state of the world-wide journey towards the SDGs is an arduous one, Nigeria, like many other nations, faces significant challenges in meeting these goals. Nigeria is believed to be currently off-track on nearly 60% of the SDG indicators, with gender inequality and the marginalization of women and girls being a significant barrier to progress as they continue to experience disproportionate levels of poverty, limited access to education and healthcare, and significant barriers to economic participation and decision-making compared to their male counterparts.

The status of women and girls in Nigeria highlights these challenges. Over 70% of women, especially in rural areas, lack access to basic education and healthcare. Nigeria ranks 130th out of 166 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index, indicating severe disparities in economic participation, education, health, and political empowerment. Gender-based violence remains pervasive, affecting nearly one in three women. Women also represent less than 5% of Nigeria's national parliament, reflecting significant underrepresentation in decision-making processes.

Addressing these challenges requires a commitment to issues of gender equality in order to transform the lives of women and girls by providing access to quality education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. It will reduce gender-based violence through targeted programs and legal reforms, ensuring a safer and development inducing environment for all. Additionally, increasing women's participation in leadership and decision-making will enable more inclusive governance, leading to more equitable policies that benefit the entire society. The GEOB is an instrument for making all of these happen.

The Gender Equality Bill: The Journey So Far

The Gender Equality Bill, formally known as the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill, is a legislative proposal that has undergone multiple readings and rejections over the past several years. It was first introduced into Nigeria's political lexicon in 2006, under the National Gender Policy of 2006, which laid the groundwork for subsequent legislative efforts to formalise gender equality. Following efforts to achieve the 2015 MDG 3 in Nigeria, the Bill resurfaced in 2010, with emphasis on improving gender parity as a key development goal. However, despite the

ambitious goals, the bill faced significant challenges in the legislative process. The Bill was pushed by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, with the backing of numerous regional and global organisations. The goal of the Bill was to domesticate international treaties and conventions that focused on gender, especially the African Union Protocol on Women's Rights in Africa and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

For the first time, in March 2016, the Bill was introduced in the Nigerian Senate by Senator Biodun Olujimi, and a vote was held to decide whether or not it should be approved and become law. The Bill was rejected on 15 March, 2016, on the claim that it contained several provisions that were incompatible with the religious and cultural beliefs of the majority of Nigerians, making it unfit to become national law (Kazeem, 2016). The Bill was again introduced in September 2016 and for the second time rejected. Those opposed to it claimed that it went against Nigerian tradition and specifically, Islamic beliefs (Payton, 2016).

Five years later, Senator Olujimi revived the Bill and presented it in March 2021. However, the Bill was not passed, giving similar defences of cultural and religious values. Relatedly, on April 22, 2021, Honourable Nkeiruka Onyejeocha, then member of the House of Representatives representing Isuikwato/Umunneochi Federal Constituency, Abia state, sponsored a significant legislative proposal for the alteration of sections 48, 49, 71, 77, 91, and 117 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The proposed amendments aimed to establish additional special seats for women in the National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly. The initiative stands as a notable and well-documented proposal for implementing a quota system to enhance female representation within the parliament. Again, the bill did not pass. In December 2022, the GEOB was reintroduced in the Nigerian Senate. This time, its scope was broadened with regard to other general gender-related and urgent concerns, such as discrimination and gender-based violence. This reintroduction reflected a holistic approach and was intended to align with local and international advocacy efforts for gender equality and women's rights.

Current Status of the Bill

Fortunately, the Bill made it to its second reading in the Senate, on 31 May, 2023. This accomplishment was a major advancement showing that, despite earlier obstacles, there was still a strong commitment to advancing gender equality. The conversation at this point highlighted how crucial the law is to guaranteeing equal opportunities in work, education, politics and society as well as protecting people from gender-based violence. The development suggested that Nigeria's legislative process was moving in the right direction toward achieving gender equality.

Having successfully passed the second reading at the Senate, a crucial milestone that brings the Bill closer to becoming law, it still needs to pass the committee stage, where it will undergo rigorous scrutiny and review before proceeding to a final vote and third reading. If approved, it will go to the House of Representatives for ratification before it is sent to the President for assent. The Bill's advancement is indicative of the growing awareness of the need to combat gender discrimination and advance equitable opportunities for all Nigerians to solidify our democracy. Though it still faces obstacles, mostly from sociocultural and religious resistance, the upcoming months will be crucial as the Bill goes through more scrutiny and debate in the legislative process. The next questions then to ask, will be what is the GEOB all about and why is such a bill important to development and democratic deepening?

The Nexus between GEOB and Deepening Nigeria's Democracy and Development

The proposed legislation seeks to implement Section 42 of the Nigerian Constitution, which prohibits discrimination on various grounds, including gender. It addresses issues such as land ownership, inheritance rights, education, employment, and the rising tide of gender-based violence.

Specifically, the Bill has 5 propositions:

Special Seats for Women: This seeks to amend Sections 48, 49, 71, 77 & 117 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), to create special seats for women in the Senate, House of Representatives, and State Houses of Assembly as a temporary special measure aimed at enhancing and encouraging women's participation and representation in politics.

Essentially, the creation of special seats for women through a possible amendment of these sections of the 1999 constitution, is to collectively ensure a fair, representative, and democratic process for the election of legislative members in Nigeria.

Expansion of the Scope of Citizenship by Registration

This sought to amend Section 26 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), to allow the foreign male spouses of Nigerian women to acquire citizenship by registration.

Presently, the key provision of this section, only allows foreign female spouses to Nigerian men obtain citizenship by registration. Thus, any man or woman who is or has been married to a citizen of Nigeria can apply for registration as a Nigerian citizen.

Affirmative Action for Women in Political Party Administration

This sought to amend Section 223 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) to provide for affirmative action in favour of women in political party administration by prescribing that at least thirty-five per cent of party executives are women.

Currently, the representation of women in political leadership at senior party executive levels, viz: Chairman and National Secretary, has been abysmally low. It is mostly the positions of woman leader and sometimes Treasurer that are occupied by women within political parties in Nigeria (Simbine, 2018; 2019). This is so despite that women account for about 47 per cent of registered voters and always effectively participate in campaigns, mobilisation and voting.

Indigeneship Rights: The GEOB seeks to amend Sections 31 and 318 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), to prescribe the criteria for qualification to become an indigene of a state in Nigeria.

It prescribes that a woman married to an indigene of a state different from her state of origin, for at least five years, should be deemed to be an indigene of that state and therefore is entitled to all rights and privileges such as employment, appointment or election into any political or public office.

Affirmative Action

This sought to amend Section 147 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), to ensure the appointment of not less than 10 per cent of women as Ministers and Commissioners in the Federal and State Executive Council to guarantee the inclusion of women in governance. This is usually by far, less than ten per cent or even non-existent in some states of the federation.

Having been rejected based on the assumption that Section 42 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria already prohibits discrimination based on sex, this nexus between the bill, development and democracy shows that the assumption of constitutional equality of genders is patently inadequate, too general, verbose and almost false. This is so because extant laws, religions, customary beliefs and practices denigrate women who also continue to suffer sundry disabilities and discriminations in the modern and traditional realms in all parts of the country. The GEOB will help to pull up Nigeria from its abysmal position in the comity of nations on the issue of women's rights because Nigeria cannot continue to indirectly put down one-half of its population. The explanatory notes on each of the above propositions not only elucidate on GEOB, they also give evidence of the importance and usefulness of the bill.

Additionally, a look at some critical statistics reveals the need for the GEOB. One is the *literacy rate* for females within the 15–24 age range which is approximately 59%, while the rate for males in the same age group is 70% (World Bank, 2024). Put differently, only about 52% of adult females (15 years and older) are literate, compared to roughly 71% of adult males (World Population Review, 2024). Sadly, Nigeria has one of the highest rates of out-of-school children (5-14 years) in the world (20 million), with girls constituting a higher percentage of that number (Alabi, 2022). The situation in the northern part of the country is even more precarious, where at least, one in three children, mostly girls, are out of school (UKFIET, 2023). This seeming imbalance can partly be redressed by law through the GEOB if women have more enlightenment about the value and benefits of educating their children, especially girls.

With a higher *illiteracy rate* compared to men, women are more vulnerable to girl-child marriage and a higher rate of gender-based violence. Accounting for 40 per cent of all child brides in the region, Nigeria has the highest number of child brides in Africa, with over 22 million girls and women married off as youngsters, and 44% of girls getting married before 18 years (UNICEF, 2018). Again, Nigeria accounts for the third highest number of women and girls who have undergone Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) worldwide, with high prevalence among girls between ages 0-14. Generally, 86% of females in Nigeria were cut before the age of five, while eight percent were cut between ages 5 and 14 (UNICEF, 2022).

The situation is no different in *health care*, where for every 100,000 live births, there are about 512 maternal fatalities. To add, the adolescent birth rate is high, with about 106 births per 1,000 girls between the ages of 15 and 19 (World Bank, 2024). Consequently, the Under-five mortality rate is 102 per 1,000 live births, a notable figure still far from the SDG (3) target of 25 per 1,000 live births. One-third of these deaths (34 per 1,000 live births) occur within the first 28 days of life (UNICEF, 2022).

The scorecard for women is equally low in economic participation. As of 2020, according to the World Bank, women earn approximately 77% of what men earn for similar work, reflecting a significant wage gap. More so, only 52.2% of the working-age female population are actively participating in the labour force compared to 65.9% of males for 2023. Data compiled between 2016 and 2024 on the share of female business owners stood at 34% compared to males at 66% for Nigeria, showing again, that women have the underhand (World Bank, 2024). This, as the NBS (2023) avers, is factored by occupational segregation and fewer opportunities for advancement, even when women own about 40% of SMEs in the country. Investing in gender equality is a smart development strategy as the McKinsey Global Institute² has shown that achieving gender equality in the labour market could add 26% or as much as \$28 trillion to global GDP by 2025. For Nigeria in particular, it is calculated that closing the gender gap in labour force participation could boost GDP by up to 23%, translating into an additional \$229 billion by 2025. These figures demonstrate the immense potential for economic growth and

² McKinsey Global Institute, 2015. The Power of Parity: How Advancing Women's Equality Can Add \$12 Trillion to Global Growth, McKinsey & Company, www.mckinsey.com.

development if we prioritize gender equality. Economic marginalisation is thus another justification for the GEOB.

Given women's *performance in elective and appointive positions*, the figures are even worse.

Nigeria's female representation is lowest in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

As of the last general elections, women hold less than 7% of the seats in the National Assembly, a figure notably lower than the regional and global averages of 23.4% for Africa and 15% for West Africa. Hence, women occupy only 3% of seats in the Senate and 4% in the House of Representatives. In 2023, women's representation dropped to 2.7% and 4.7% in the Senate and House of Representatives, respectively.

As of 2023, only 3 out of 17 Justices of the Supreme Court are women, representing 31%. Females constitute 21 out of 84 judges at the Court of Appeal, and there are only 25 females out of 74 judges at the Federal High Courts, constituting 34% (THISDAY, August 31, 2024).

Women are only 7 out of the 39 Federal Ministers. While no woman is a Governor, and less than 10% of councillors are women at the local government level.

Flowing from the above, the implications of the GEOB on democratic deepening are to:

- a. Ensure equal opportunities for men and women in all spheres of life.
- b. Eliminate all forms of discrimination and marginalization against women and girls.
- c. Promote gender mainstreaming in policymaking and implementation.
- d. Enhance the participation of women in political, economic and public life.

These implications are sacrosanct, because robust democracy is characterised by the inclusion and participation of all, not just some of its citizens. Gender equality is not merely women's issues, they are societal issues and fundamental democratic principles. The exclusion of women from political and economic processes limits the diversity of perspectives and solutions available to address our national challenges.

Table 1: Female Representation in Selected Elective and Appointive Positions (1999-2023)

Year	1999		2003		2007		2011		2015		2019		2023	
Office	Sea t	Wome n	Sea t	Wome n	Sea t	Wome n	Sea t	Wome n	Sea t	Wome n	Sea t	Wome n	Sea t	Wome n
Preside nt	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Vice Preside nt	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0

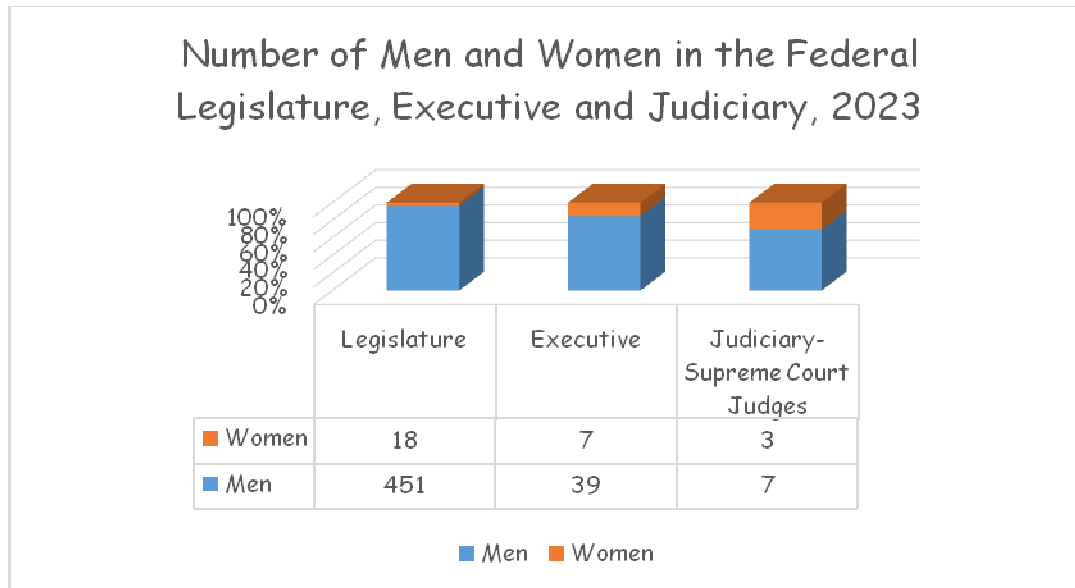
Senate	109	3(2.8 %)	109	3 (2.27%)	109	9(8.26%)	109	7 (6.4%)	109	7 (6.4%)	109	8(7.3 %)	109	3 (2.7%)
House of Reps.	360	12 (3.3%)	360	21(5.83 %)	360	25(6.98 %)	360	26 (7.2%)	360	22 (6.11 %)	360	13 (3.6%)	360	17 (4.7%)
Govern or	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0
Deputy Govern or	36	1	36	2	36	6	36	1	36	-	36	4	36	8



Annals of the Social Science Academy of Nigeria Vol. 23 January–December 2019/2023

State Houses of Assembly	990	24 (2.4%)	990	38 (3.84%)	990	54(5.45 %)	990	68 (6.9%)	990	-	990	44 (4.41 %)	990	48(4.85 %)
Ministers	47	9 (19.1 %)	33	5 (15.1%)	39	7 (17.9%)	41	13 (31.7 %)	36	6 (16.6 %)	44	7 (15.9 %)	28	7 (25%)

Source: Adapted from PGPD, NISER, 2024 Draft Proposal



Dataphyte, 2024

Let us look at these implications in detail:

- a. *Political Participation*: Women's underrepresentation affects the formulation and implementation of policies that address not just women's needs and priorities, but also the addressing of general societal problems wearing a gender lens. The Gender Equality Bill aims to rectify this by advocating for affirmative action policies that would ensure a minimum quota for women in policymaking.
- b. *Economic Empowerment*: Economic empowerment of women is crucial for sustainable development. The GEOB thus proposes measures to eliminate these barriers, thereby enabling women to contribute more effectively to the economy and development of the country.
- c. *Education and Health*: Access to education and healthcare are fundamental rights that must be guaranteed for all citizens. Disparities in these areas disproportionately affect women and girls, limiting their potential and reinforcing cycles of debilitating poverty.
- d. *Protection from Violence*: Gender-based violence remains a pervasive issue in Nigeria. The Bill advocates for stronger legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms to protect women and girls from violence and ensure justice for victims. This is crucial for creating a safe and conducive environment for the safety, welfare, and personal development for all citizens.

The failure to pass the Bill perpetuates a cycle of vulnerability and discrimination. Without the legal protections and equal rights afforded by the GEOB, women and girls remain vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, including kidnappings by terrorist groups who are predominantly composed of frustrated males who, deprived of opportunities and driven by a need for sexual

satisfaction, target young schoolgirls. This environment of fear significantly contributes to Nigeria's staggering statistics where 20% of the world's out-of-school girls are in Nigeria, as parents hesitate to send their daughters to school. This further exacerbates the socioeconomic conditions leading to higher dropout rates among girls, increased vulnerability to abductions, poverty and marginalisation. Thus, the GEOB includes provisions for improving girls' access to the essentials for achieving gender equality and overall societal progress.

Economic empowerment, political participation, accessibility to education and health, social inclusivity and protection from violence are essential to ensuring a favourable milieu for the safety, welfare and prosperity of all citizens, including vulnerable groups, especially women. The Social Science Academy of Nigeria, (SSAN), being a reputable and long-standing association of social scientists and reputable academics, is in good stead to champion this cause. At this juncture, it is imperative to provide some theoretical underpinnings that support the GEOB.

Theoretical Foundations in favour of the GEOB

The pursuit for the passage of the GEOB is not just the figment of the desires of so-called feminists or western scholars, it is backed by sound theoretical foundations.

Social Inclusion (SI) and Social Dominance (SD) Theories

The SI and SD theories are both useful and are for the purpose of this lecture thus entwined for a better understanding of the problem of low women involvement in society in Nigeria and the need for gender equality in its truest sense.

Social Inclusion (SI) Theory

SI theory, which describes the process of inclusion and exclusion based on hierarchies, was propounded by David Pocock in 1957 (Allman, 2013). It argues that groups face limitations that inhibit their effective engagement within social, economic and political spheres. According to Civicus report (2018), most marginalised groups, such as women, are often excluded from leadership roles and decision-making. Hence, the theory supports the removal of barriers hindering their involvement, thereby advocating for an inclusive society, where there is equal access to resources, opportunities and expression of fundamental human rights for the benefit of societal development.

The GEOB reflects the marginalisation and deliberate exclusion of women from strategic situations and positions that can yield empowerment and prosperity. The bill, which seeks to advance gender equality, through a more holistic approach, will be instrumental to promoting the inclusion of women in society, which will harness their potential to contribute to overall development. In other words, through several people's abilities and opportunities, which are in varying capacities among social groups, social inclusion helps to diversify options and produce

better problem-solving mechanisms. With the recurring rejection of the bill, by a majority group (men), the rights of the minority (women), are not only abused, but they are largely excluded from contributing their quota to development.

As useful as the SI theory is, within the frame of legislation, the issue of gender discrimination is not adequately addressed by the social inclusion theory. This is because, changes in policies or environments may not address the marginalization of women if the underlying power structures causing and aggravating inequality are constant. Therefore, this gap is complemented by the Social Dominance (SD) theory, which provides a deeper context for understanding the intersection between societal hierarchies and gender inequality.

Social Dominance Theory

SD theory was primarily developed by social psychologists Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto in 1990, but the theory has thereafter benefitted largely from several authors and researchers exploring how social hierarchies and power dynamics shape attitudes, behaviours, and societal structures (Sidanius and Pratto, 2001). The theory is a multilevel dynamic paradigm, which seeks to clarify issues related to oppression and discrimination.

Proponents of social dominance theory argue that it provides a useful framework for understanding how power structures and social hierarchies influence attitudes and behaviours within societies. They position the theory as valuable for examining how groups with higher social dominance orientation (**men**), and those who support and benefit from existing power imbalances (**men**), tend to resist changes that challenge these hierarchies. Conversely, individuals or groups with lower social dominance orientation (**women**), and who are more likely to support equality and social justice (**women**), often advocate for reforms that reduce inequalities.

In the context of the GEOB in Nigeria, supporters of the theory would argue that it helps explain why there is significant opposition³ to the Bill from those who hold a higher social dominance orientation. They may, sometimes unknowingly, view the Bill as a threat to their social status and power. Meanwhile, those with a lower social dominance orientation are more inclined to support the Bill, favour reducing hierarchical barriers and promoting gender equality. This perspective highlights the role of entrenched power dynamics in shaping the debate and implementation of gender equality policies. Thus, obstacles abound!

Challenges, Resistance and Way Forward

Despite its noble objectives, the GEOB has faced significant resistance. Cultural and religious arguments are the strongest and often cited to oppose the Bill, with some claiming that it

³ Afterall, the Nigerian Parliament is composed predominantly of men.

contravenes traditional values and religious teachings. This resistance underscores the deep-seated patriarchal⁴ norms that continue to shape societal attitudes towards gender roles. These are particularly strong in Nigeria.

Furthermore, vision, political will and resolve are critical for the Bill's passage and implementation. Without the support of key political, cultural and religious actors and stakeholders, the Bill's provisions may remain theoretical aspirations rather than practical realities.

Way Forward: Advocacy and Action

To overcome these challenges, a multi-faceted approach is required.

Public Awareness and Education:

It is essential to raise public awareness about the benefits of gender equality and the provisions of the GEOB. Aggressive advocacy campaigns should target urban and rural areas, leveraging traditional and social media to reach diverse audiences. The SSAN, working as their umbrella organisation, the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities and other stakeholders like the Federal Ministry of Education etc. need to aggressively fight for the issue of gender equality to be included in the curriculum from basic to university education. This is key to educating citizens about gender issues such that children and young adults are sensitised as they grow and mature into full participants in societal life.

Aggressive Engagement with Religious, Cultural and Traditional Leaders:

Constructive dialogue with religious, cultural and traditional leaders in the parts of the country that need it the most, can foster broader acceptance and help address cultural and religious concerns. The need to demonstrate that gender equality aligns with the fundamental principles of justice, fairness, and human dignity promotes prosperity and democratic deepening.

Strengthening Civil Society:

Civil society and community-based organisations play crucial roles in advocating for gender equality and holding the government accountable. They have been playing important roles in seeking convergence in approach and supporting mobilisation. Increasing backing for these

⁴ For more on patriarchy and patriarchal For more on patriarchy and patriarchal practices, see Falola, Toyin and Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso (2024) *Women in Africa*, Forthcoming, Routledge; Godiya Allanana Makama, "Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Nigeria: The Way Forward," *European Scientific Journal* 9, no. 17 (2013): 119; Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Bargaining with patriarchy." *Gender & society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 274-290.

organisations through funding, capacity building, and strategic partnerships can enhance their impact.

Political and Empirically-based Advocacy:

Engaging with lawmakers and political parties to garner support for the Bill is vital. The current efforts at constitution review in the House of Representatives, led by the Deputy Speaker, Rt Hon Benjamin Kalu are commendable and need to be sustained through lobbying efforts, providing evidence-based research (NISER has several studies, and is currently undertaking a study in this regard), role modelling and mentoring, showcasing the successful lives of women who were given opportunities, as well as highlighting successful examples from other countries will help foster increased understanding and broader acceptance.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

One is positive that it is only a matter of time before the GEOB will be passed. The government of the day at the Executive level and in Parliament, are undoubtedly very women-friendly and supportive. Once enacted, it is crucial to monitor the implementation of the Bill's provisions. This will involve setting up mechanisms to track progress, identify challenges, and ensure that the intended outcomes are achieved.

Conclusion

Limited awareness and understanding of the importance and implications of gender equality legislation give room for misconceptions about gender equality, leading to resistance or apathy toward the GEOB among policymakers, legislators, and the general public. It is important to note that overcoming these barriers requires sustained advocacy, public awareness campaigns, strategic alliances, and engagement with various stakeholders. It also requires addressing the underlying social and cultural norms that will engender gender inequalities. Overcoming these challenges is crucial for achieving gender equality and promoting women's rights, development and democratic deepening.

As we reflect on our 64 years of independence, six end-of-tenure general elections and 25 years of uninterrupted democratic rule, it is crucial to commit to advancing gender equality as a cornerstone of our development and democratic aspirations. No doubt, culture and religious milieu are important, but so are the rights of all persons and the GEOB can be tweaked to suit all environments. Religion and culture should thus not be used as pliers for not doing right and marginalising others to not attain their full potentials. The presence of women often more than anything, improves governance and leads to better decision-making as considerations around policy issues tend to be more nuanced and deeper (Wersema and Mors, 2023). Maximising the involvement of women will put more meaning to the core of our national business. As we close

this lecture, I commend the SSAN's choice of topic as a way to bring the GEO Bill back to the front burner in public discourse in the hope of goading the National Assembly to pass the Bill. I challenge all parliamentarians, political office holders, heads of MDAs and private sector organisations to commit to lifting up, in all ramifications, at least one woman or group of women annually, before their tenure ends and see how far it takes us as a nation. It is a truism that together, we can create a Nigeria where every individual, regardless of gender, can thrive and contribute to improving Nigeria's status in the comity of nations and generally remaking Nigeria the giant that it is. All peoples, tiers and sectors of government need to commit to this kind of positive vision. Be a part!!!

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