




# Tokenism and women's political communication in the pursuit of gender egalitarianism in Nigeria

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## Abstract

With all gender bills presented to Nigeria's Federal House of Assembly rejected in March 2022, women suffered an outrageous backlash in their pursuit of gender egalitarianism. This affirms tokenism and the government's feigned commitment to gender parity. Reckoning that women's political participation should augment their political representation, this article interrogates the political communication tactics of selected women in politics and non-state actors who fought for the bills. By engaging methods of critical analysis and reconstructive argumentation, we use the concept of "Feminist African Political Communication" (Feminist Afropolicom) to: (1) foreground African communicative experiences and tactics adopted by the women; (2) interrogate how tokenism trumps women's political communication; and (3) examine how such tactics address questions of agency, space, and power.

**Keywords:** African political communication, feminist Afropolicom, Nigeria's gender bills, gender egalitarianism, tokenism

Nigeria is a veritable case study to discuss tokenism and the quest for egalitarianism. Tokenism ensues when a participant is permitted entrance, but not full participation (Law, 1975); when admittance into such spaces is to portray the institution or organization as non-discriminatory; and when artificial appearance is enacted to feign commitment to correcting inadequate representation (Kanter, 1977; Yoder, 2002). Often, such persons have fulfilled all criteria for inclusion, yet they are denied authority to perform in that capacity (Okome, 2000; Zimmer, 1988). This triggers a pursuit of egalitarianism, wherein equality becomes central to any positively impactful system. Egalitarianism as a social, economic, and political concept may be understood in terms of relations between people as well as the distribution of "public good" to which everyone is entitled by nature and nurture" (Omotoso, 2020c, p. 123), including "social insurance, proper education, and public utilities" (pp. 117–118). An egalitarian society connotes equal worth and dignity of people not only as a means to an end but as an end in itself. However, tokenism negates egalitarianism as it instrumentalizes certain persons as a means to filling gender, class, and/or racial gaps, rather than recognizing them as persons with equal moral status (Nussbaum, 2000; Steady, 2002).

Descriptions of post-independence African States as largely patriarchal may be attributed to how the colonial regimes from which they are derived also excluded women. Studies have highlighted how women struggled to defend and advance their individual and collective interests under the changing conditions of colonialism and post-colonialism (Mba, 1989; Mama, 1995; Mamdani, 1996). In the same vein, Parpart and Staudt (1989) posit that research on women and the State in Africa has so far addressed itself to the effects of the colonial and post-colonial state on women, for the most part noting how both have enhanced male power over

women and how the state has been primarily a vehicle of male elite interests. This corroborates Chazan's (1989, p. 186) assertion that "women have neither played a significant part in the creation of the modern state system on the continent nor have they been able to establish regular channels of access to decision-makers. State policies toward women have, as a result, exhibited varying degrees of discrimination and coercion." Further to this, Mama (1995) probes into women's significant role in the governance of the State, particularly within long-standing dictatorships and autocracies, arguing that it is increasingly clear that gender cannot be left out of political analyses thus, confirming the need for a more fruitful approach to the discourse on women's political participation and representation in Africa. With transitions to democracy across African states, state formation and state practices involving women have been a concern among stakeholders including civil society organizations.

Since Nigeria's return to civil rule in 1999, women's representation in politics has not been commensurate with their political participation. With a 49.9% female population in a country of over 200 million people and a 53.8 population of urban dwellers (Datareportal, 2023), Nigeria continues to fall short of the global women representation quota. For instance, at the 2023 general election, females constituting only 10.1% contested for political offices and a meager 6.1% (72 women) made it through the elections. Of the 72 women that emerged, there were seven Deputy Governors; 18 National Assembly members—three in the Senate and 15 in the House of Representatives, and others elected to the various State Houses of Assembly (BellaNaija.com, 2023). That women's representation in politics has been limited to a select few to feign diversity and inclusivity, while the broader systemic barriers and gender inequalities remain unaddressed affirms Nigerian women's political presence as more nominal and

illusory than substantive, hence indicating tokenism in the system (Mohammed & Zaid, 2014; Olurode, 2013).

In Nigeria's politics, tokenism is more visible in the realm of women's political representation and not so much in women's political participation. Our theoretical conceptualization here is that there is a complex dynamic of women's involvement in Nigeria's politics, which negates tokenism in participation but affirms it in representation. In contrast, participation in politics allows for all classes of women in the space. Elite women combine their mobilizing skills with strategic leadership skills earned from experiences in business, academia, and other sectors of the economy where they have been actively involved, yet their participation has not attained the prescribed global provision of a 35% quota for representation in public and political offices. Consequently, elite women are tokenized because they bring additional expertise and perspectives (including ideas that disrupt male hegemony) to the political landscape beyond their grassroots counterparts. However, grassroots women's political participation is captured in how women flood campaign grounds in party attire, constituting the larger voting masses at elections, and playing key roles as mobilizers, and cheerleaders (Sheldon, 2020). This establishes a "hairy-hairless dichotomy" (Omotoso, 2020b), which explains the bifurcation of political space among both elites and grassroots women. Tokenism sustains a drift from increased representation to increased participation, which keeps Nigeria stuck within retaining women as participants and restraining them from being elected or appointed en masse into political offices.

Further to the probing of women's political participation and representation, this study focuses on women's political communication as an undertheorized area. We interrogate connections with women's political representation from the Global South (Africa), first by spotlighting how political participation is becoming differently construed from political representation across Africa. We proceed to expound the import of unnoticed political communication strategies used by women and argue that although women's political communication is documented as political participation, it must be harnessed to culminate into women's substantive representation. Our approach is both conceptual and descriptive, spotlighting the concept "Afropolicom" (African Political Communication) which embodies communicative content and contexts derivable from Africa's political processes. We affirm that African communicative experiences are unique and should thus be understood outside non-Western frames (Eweka, 2020). Moreover, our inquiry extends into Feminist Afropolicom (Feminist African Political Communication) to provide robust and "empirically grounded means to investigate strategies and logic" for "gendering all processes of decentralized and reformative information situated within political practices" (Omotoso & Faniyi, 2020, pp. 3–4). Fundamental to Feminist Afropolicom are questions of space, power and agency, exploring "what powers women wield (...) and whether such add up to institutionalized power relations" (Omotoso & Faniyi, 2020, p. 3). It speaks to "the colonial-motivated denialism of the African social order, the retrogressive effect of (neo)colonialism on African female power; and the repressive logic which works against women in contemporary African politics" (Omotoso & Faniyi, 2020, p. 3). Here, tokenism exemplifies this repressive logic and thereby focuses on emerging Feminist Afropolicom tactics

deployed by women in 2022 when the five gender bills were rejected by Nigeria's 9th Assembly.

The next section of this article discusses tokenism in Nigeria's political space, providing a historical background to the irony of the gulf created between women's political participation and their political representation. The remaining parts of the study expounds on women's political communication in Nigeria, drawing examples from pre-colonial communities to the more recent past. Reflections on feminist Afropolicom tactics on the rejected gender bills in Nigeria are discussed, and concluding thoughts offered on approaching gender egalitarianism in Nigeria.

### Tokenism in Nigeria's political space

The strength of democracy lies in the equal participation of the members of society; accordingly, political participation is paramount in democratic systems. Political participation covers "those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and, directly or indirectly, in the formation of public policy" (McClosky, 1968, p. 252). It includes activities such as voting in elections, meeting with community members, contacting political representatives, or involvement in collective action by citizens that are aimed at influencing the selection and decisions of government personnel (Ramtohum, 2021). As a means-ends approach, political participation entails the manners of implementing political activities among selected target groups and what the acts/actions are meant to achieve. Suffice it to say that political participation herald political representation, as it is only logical that representation be drawn from active participants in the process, sadly, this cannot be said of women's representation in politics across Africa. We note recent success stories of Rwanda, Namibia, and South Africa over the years, still, the question of critical mass resulting in critical acts remains. On the one hand, the critical mass argument is that representation corresponds to impact and that the more women are represented in politics, the greater the impact they can make (Beckwith, 2007; Lovenduski & Norris, 2003). On the other hand, there is the critical act argument, which rests on the agency of the few women in political spaces and not necessarily on the number (Childs & Krook, 2009). Still, the patriarchal spatialization of politics has been a bane to contend with as the decades ushered in democratic dispensations across Africa. Since the early 1990s, debates on women's political participation across Africa have reckoned with increasing awareness and heightened interest of women in politics (Deth, 2016), covering the politics of presence, interest, and impact, beginning with women's visibility in political space, women's access to political power, and women's prospects for advancement in political offices, both appointive and elective (Barnes & Holman, 2020; Bauer, 2012; Dahlerup, 2006). Among notable players in this context are: (1) grassroots women who campaign for political parties and vote during elections; (2) the office of First Ladies (Eweka, 2020), which has retained prominence as a women's space, though designed to serve their spouses' patriarchal interests; and (3) the substantive representation of women in appointive and elective offices, which continues to dwindle due to the challenge of tokenism.

In Nigeria, tokenism dates back in time, with only three women appointed to the pre-independence House of Chiefs in the 1950s. This came after much agitation for space-making by the trio of Funmilayo Ransome Kuti (appointed

into the Western Nigeria House of Chiefs); Margaret Ekpo and Janet Mokelu (both appointed into the Eastern Nigeria House of Chiefs). By 1960, Wuraola Esan from Western Nigeria became the first female member of the Federal Parliament. Followed closely by the victory of Margaret Ekpo in 1961 as a member of the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly until 1966, Janet N. Mokelu and Ekpo A. Young also became members of the Eastern House of Assembly. However, the situation was different in northern Nigeria as women were denied franchise until 1979 when the civilian government came on board. At that period, prominent female politicians like Gambo Sawaba from northern Nigeria could neither vote nor be voted for. This reflects cultural and geographical politics which hindered the uniformity of women's progress in post-independence northern and southern Nigeria (Omotoso & Enweremadu, 2022). Likewise, Okome (2000) corroborates that the same predominantly male bourgeoisie who cooperated and collaborated with women activists and supporters during the nationalist struggle for independence thereafter relegated women to subordinate and ineffectual positions in politics. As party politics reappeared following prolonged military rule, party constitutions drawn by a predominantly male population made a tokenist provision for women. From more recent trends since 1999, the situation has meandered through the good, the bad, and the ugly. In 2007 Nigeria's National Assembly had 36 women out of 469 legislators. At 7.6%, this remains the highest number of women in the NASS ever recorded (YIAGA Africa, 2020). By 2022, women's representation in the 9th National Assembly stayed at 4.47% (21 of the 469 legislators), further affirming tokenism within elections and appointments in Nigeria's political space.

### On Nigeria's rejected gender bills

Five gender bills covering indigeneship, citizenship, and affirmative action were presented to Nigeria's 9th National Assembly, but all were rejected in 2022. A full description of the bills reveals intentions to amend the constitution and provide:

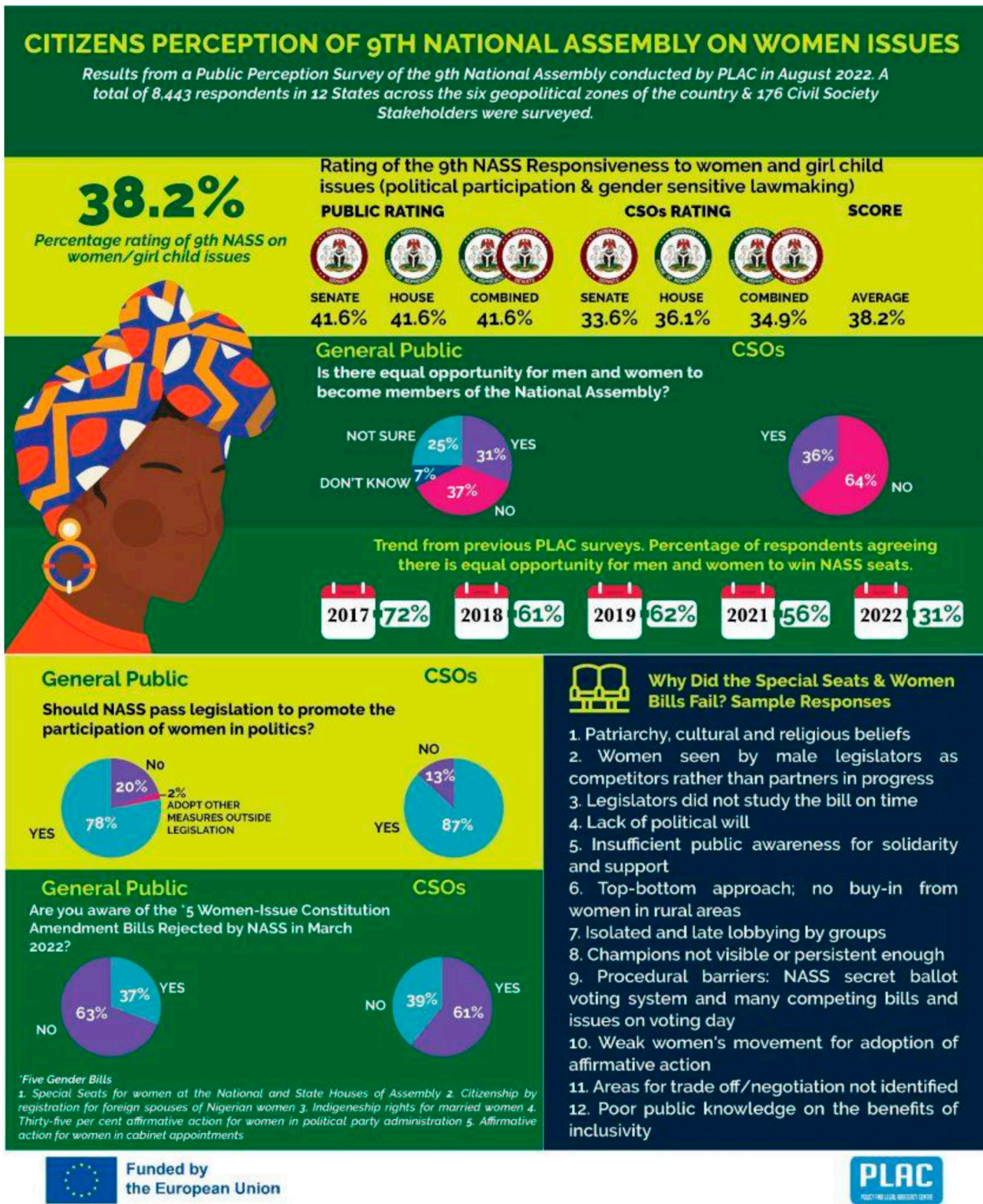
- 1) Special seats for women at the national assembly through the creation of an additional 111 seats in the National Assembly as well as at the state constituent assemblies.
- 2) Affirmative action for women in political party administration and appointed positions across federal and state levels.
- 3) Citizenship to foreign-born husbands of a Nigerian woman, a right that every Nigerian man married to a foreign spouse enjoys. Recalling that the National Conference (2014, pp. 547–548) had proposed that section 26(2) (a) of the 1999 Nigerian constitution be amended to read “any person who is or has been married to a citizen of Nigeria” can be granted citizenship by registration. This will cover male and female spouses.
- 4) For a woman to become an indigene of her husband's state after five years of marriage.
- 5) 35% of political positions, based on the appointment of women to ministerial positions.

The Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill sponsored by Biodun Olujimi was first introduced at the 8<sup>th</sup> Senate in March 2016 but lacked sufficient support and so, was

rejected after some male senators raised concerns over possible infringement on Islamic morals. The religious basis for this argument is that women are not to take leadership roles. The bill was raised on subsequent occasions, but its consideration and passage kept meeting with stiff resistance (Iroanusi, 2021). Next, the bill which sought to alter sections 48, 49, 71, 77, 91, and 117 of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution (2011) by creating one senatorial seat and two federal constituencies in each state, and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) for women, sponsored by Nkeiruka Onyejeocha. Also, there was the bill which sought to increase women's representation in legislative houses by creating an additional 108 seats in the state houses of assembly for women, co-sponsored by Nkeiruka Onyejeocha, Femi Gbajabamila, and over 80 legislators. This bill sought to amend section 91 of the 1999 Constitution but was on March 2, 2022, rejected by the National House of Assembly. Only 30 senators voted for its passage while 58 voted against it. In the House of Representatives, 81 voted for the bill, while an overwhelming 208 voted against it. For the affirmative action bill, 34 senators voted for it and 53 voted against it. These bills have suffered rejection based on religious and cultural grounds, fostered by the misogynist approach of political actors (Africanews, 2021). This can relate to the practice of including a small number of women in political and decision-making positions as a symbolic gesture, rather than as a genuine commitment to achieving gender equality in Nigeria's political landscape. A survey was conducted by Policy and Legal Advocacy Center (PLAC, 2022b), on the perception of the 9th National Assembly's performance on women's issues (see Figure 1 below). Respondents were drawn from the public and civil society stakeholders across Nigeria's six geo-political zones. It reveals that there is increasing awareness about the inequalities that exist in terms of the opportunities for men and women to win seats in the National Assembly. In addition, 78% of respondents agree that the National Assembly should pass legislation to promote women's political participation.

Tokenism in letter and spirit eats deep into the fabric of Nigerian politics through the political parties, the electoral commission, and the media. This trio combines to make it difficult for women to have a voice in governance where they are mostly needed. For instance, the women's wings of political parties have been observed to possess very little functional relevance in achieving increased women's representation (Kolawole et al., 2013). Omotoso and Enweremadu (2022) point out how political party constitutions and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC Nigeria, 2022) continue paying lip service to policies that would enable women's representation. Likewise, the misogynistic press hampers women's opportunities to gain and keep prominent spaces in politics.

Theoretically, one may argue that grass-roots women's massive operation at the level of participation is shrouded in “detrimental agency,”<sup>1</sup> and that tokenism shrouds elite women's sparse representation in politics. Yet, “detrimental agency” underscores the trivialization of number since the population of women in Nigeria which would have strengthened their place in politics is disregarded. It is expressive of Nigeria's tokenist tendencies as both grassroots and elite women are instrumentalized more as political foot soldiers than in substantive positions of leadership. Ultimately, both “detrimental agency” and “tokenism” work together to



**Figure 1.** Infographic on the perception of the 9th National Assembly’s performance on women issues. Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC) [Infographic]. Retrieved May 31, 2023. <https://placng.org/Legist/plac-production-citizens-perception-of-the-9th-national-assembly-on-women-issues/>.

foster women’s sparse representation in politics. By implication, tokenism is evident when political participation trumps political representation, and this may be traced to detrimental agency: the trivialization of women’s resilience, an

undermining of women’s voice and autonomy, and its upturn into an instrument of subversion.

“Political influence is exercised through the use of communication, and this influence manifests in forming political will

(...)” particularly when “the political communication is ungendered and rife with deep-seated bias against women” (Agunbiade & Akiode, 2017, p. 163). Here lies the essence of political communication as a fundamental tool for political participation and representation. This will be expanded in the following section.

### Women’s political communication in Nigeria

Political communication (hereafter, *policom*) operates as a three-way linkage between the government, the media, and the masses, encompassing the relaying of government policies, the responses elicited from non-state actors and grassroots movements, and the strategic packaging of political messages. It also extends beyond explicit political discourse, as non-political materials, concepts, and issues can be framed to evoke political interpretations and reactions, constituting the complex landscape of political communication (Mutsvauro & Karam, 2018; Olayiwola, 2016). Political communication offers a variety of outlets for political actors to stay up to date on events in public spaces while also building specialized perceptions of important political issues. Inferentially, political participation requires state and non-state actors to deploy political communication (which relies on the mass media) to achieve pre-defined political goals. The peculiarity of political communication cannot be underestimated, as “the intents of government and the governed ride on the wings of how adequately political communication has been channeled to achieve pre-defined democratic objectives” (Omotoso, 2018, p. 191).

As in most other aspects of life, Bauer (2012) bemoans how poorly women candidates are portrayed in the media and how little attention is paid to the campaigns of women running for political office. Again, the means of communication available to women, as well as their influence on such platforms, impacts whether content is developed for or against women. Just as traditional modes of communication can limit the speed and coverage of women-focused news, news and social media may damage women’s political ambition due to their speed. This expounds on media usage of women for development while deliberately under-developing women through negative coverage and reportage (Omotoso, 2018; 2019). Likewise, as the media retain much prominence in determining political outcomes (Windeck, 2010), press framing could make or mar the mass mobilization for women in politics. Consequently, Osei-Appiah (2021, p. 110) expresses that “gender is a blind spot in political communication research” as media portrayal of women, often contributes to determining women’s place in governance and other public spheres.

Nigeria has bred influential women whose political communication tactics demonstrate great conviction and persuasion across spheres. Their actions and contributions have massively impacted the political landscape, as many have challenged authorities and spoken truth to power. Although extant scholarship has established sexism, non-inclusiveness, and evasion of women’s perspectives in pertinent national, regional, and continental issues, women in Nigeria have deployed germane political communication strategies for calling attention to their plights and achieving group objectives. These strategies have been described as feminist political communication tactics (feminist *policom* tactics) (Omotoso & Faniyi, 2020) including radical, liberal, negotiating, and soft-power tactics.

In an analysis of Nina Mba’s works,<sup>2</sup> Omotoso teased these feminist *policom* tactics since pre-colonial times, by examining “the ir/relevance of the identified women’s political communication strategies (...) the roles of the media in promoting or suppressing women and the pushback tactics deployed by women in contemporary politics” (Omotoso, 2022, p. 3). The process unearths political communication tactics of pre-colonial and colonial women built around “strong reliance on the ‘collective strength’ which comes in the forms of kinship, trade links, village groups, associations, and sex solidarity” (Mba, 1997, p. 68).

The records have it that “the men’s resistance was quickly crushed, but the women continued the opposition even after they experienced harsh repression” (Mba, 1997, p. 45). Mba notes instances “where women would even address and sign a letter to authorities under a tag like “The Women, Owerri Road, Aba” (*Oha nd’inyom*, literally meaning “a gathering of women”) (Mba, 1997, p. 91). Also noteworthy is how women in Western Nigeria mostly deployed collective actions (except for a few who fought individually) via “traditional commodity associations to form pressure groups” (Mba, 1997, p. 140). An instance is that of a press release stating that: “We, the members of the Abeokuta Ladies Club, on behalf of all Egba women (...)” (Mba, 1997, p. 144). Such impressive solidarity was recorded “when any woman was arrested for nonpayment of tax, thousands of women protested outside the court or jail” (Mba, 1997, p. 150). The solidarity equally resonates oneness as found in the women’s call to “help rally round (...) and fight not only those who will relegate women to the background but also those who may try to separate the Western women from their Eastern and Northern counterparts” (Mba, 1997, p. 209). These are captured as feminist *Afropolicom* tactics of earlier times (Omotoso, 2022) corroborating the necessity of unpacking “the various context-dependent factors which culminate in shaping African women’s experiences in quite distinct ways” (Osei-Appiah, 2021, p. 114) as an important approach to contextualizing gender research in *Afropolicom*.

### Liberal political communication tactic

African women involved in politics often employ liberal strategies that appeal to logical reasoning and rationality in addressing various issues. This approach challenges the prevailing notion that women solely rely on emotional appeals in their political engagement, as the era of emotional politicking is gradually waning. By predominantly utilizing the tools of *logos* (logic) and *ethos* (credibility), liberal political communication tactics enable the presentation of solid evidence, data, and well-documented facts that stakeholders cannot easily dismiss. These “conscious attempts to re-enable and inspire” (Omotoso & Faniyi 2020, p. 4) women in politics are frequently employed by elite female politicians, women in academia, and civil society organizations (Omotoso 2020a). An illustrative example is the case of Professor Bolanle Awe, who resigned from her position as Chairperson of the National Commission for Women due to a dispute with the First Lady’s Office. Awe’s resignation, based on the reason that she could not fulfill the Commission’s objectives (Mama, 1995), exemplifies a non-violent and logical approach to retreat; a feminist *policom* tactic leaving the public to speculate on the underlying issues.

### Radical political communication tactics

The use of a “bold face approach” where women consciously display strength in the face of crisis resonates with radical feminist policom tactics (Omotoso, 2020a; 2022). An example is seen during colonial rule, with women who engaged in “sit-in” or civil disobedience, kept vigils at the palace, carried out mock traditional sacrifices, and sang abusive songs to the displeasure of the King (Mba, 1997, p. 153). Radical feminist policom is also found in the case of Funmilayo Ransome Kuti who was known for her wits and courage in “facing police, and judges, and on one occasion even had a physical struggle with a District Officer (...) she would insist on speaking Yoruba to the British officials and have their replies translated into Yoruba” (Mba, 1997, p. 151).

A more recent instance is seen in Nigeria's former Minister of Finance, Ngozi Okonjo Iweala who claimed an upbringing of “keep your nose clean, hold your head high” (Okonjo-Iweala, 2018, p. 5). She described her resolve to proceed with her official routine while her mother was kidnapped by unknown people as follows:

Given that the start of most cabinet sessions was televised (...) I needed to show them that I was not daunted and could not be blackmailed( ... ) I held my head high, participated actively in the cabinet meeting, and even presented my memos. It was one of the most difficult acts of my life (...) it showed strength under pressure, which amazed me because I did not feel strong at all. (Okonjo-Iweala, 2018, p. 5)

Women often subsequently resort to confrontation and/or violent protests as in the case of Abeokuta Women's Union in 1946, where “women were consciously reverting to the traditional Yoruba practice of saying publicly to the Oba, ‘we reject you’” (Johnson, 1921, p. 74). These radical policom tactics exist across spaces, although they have not been widely recognized as women's political communication until recently.

### Negotiation tactics

This tactic aligns with Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of Nego-Feminism, which women employ to navigate patriarchal dynamics within political arenas. Negotiation tactics can also be associated with strategic lobbying, wherein activities such as “note-taking, petition writing, using quotes and asking for a voice” become essential tools (Mba, 1997, p. 88). While Oladejo (2018) illustrates pre-colonial women's use of note-taking, petition writing, using quotes, and asking for a voice as a radical approach, we contend that these practices have since evolved into political communication techniques through which women negotiate their presence and influence within political spaces.

### Soft power tactics

This tactic encompasses the subtle methods of persuasion employed by women, which involve various forms of performances that resonate with cultural sensibilities. Examples of such tactics include when the women called the king a “father” although he was a perpetrator of abuse during the Abeokuta Women's Revolt of the 1940s. Soft power tactics also include: utilizing specific costumes during protests, singing songs with coded lyrics, staging dramas addressing pressing issues, and writing novels that tackle national concerns.

The next section will delve into how these tactics intersect with the recent rejection of gender bills in Nigeria.

### Feminist Afropolicom tactics on the rejected gender bills in Nigeria

In our reflexivity declaration, we identify as Nigerians and feminist *acada* activists. This allows us to straddle academic roles as researchers (often called *acada* in Nigeria) and our various collaborations with Non-Governmental Organizations, with which we gain an insider view of the issues and often understand hitherto misconstrued contexts. To foreground our theoretical discussions, we engaged participant observation and contextual analysis to identify, categorize and evaluate the policom tactics used by selected stakeholders in this study, as well as the result they achieved in the process. We did these as members of two organizations: (1) the Women's Research and Documentation Center (WORDOC)—as part of WORDOC's task is to ally with sister organizations in lobbying government with regards to women's wellbeing; and (2) the Center for Applied Ethics and Political Communication in Africa (CAEPOCOM AFRICA) whose role in the process included offering training workshops on women's political communication. Our observation began in 2021 when the Gender Equality Bill and the Bill for Special Seats for women at the National Assembly were introduced. We subsequently followed other gender-related bills by providing logistic support, including reviewing and reworking of related documents for re-presentation. Our participation spans advocacy programs hosted by the Nigerian Women Trust Fund (NUTF), agenda-setting conferences organized by over 200 civil society groups led by WOMANIFESTO, and roundtable meetings organized by Policy and Legal Advocacy Center (PLAC). The period of study was 2021-2023, covering post-rejection activities on the bills. The meeting spaces, which included event centers, town-halls, city squares and online platforms, were open to researcher-activists who could help improve content and amplify awareness of the proposed bills. We took notes, and analyzed public interviews granted us by key players. We also analyzed selected media content and gleaned the political communication tactics used by stakeholders in this study. We observed and analyzed three major stakeholders including: (1) two women MP who sponsored the bills; (2) selected media organizations who played key roles in promoting the bills; and (3) selected non-governmental organizations who reacted to the bills' rejection.

At a series of meetings with key stakeholders between January 2021 and March 2023, we noticed that both Olujimi and Onyejeocha engaged NGOs, media, academia, and grassroots communities on the proposed bills. The engagement was a continuum from the ideation stage of the bill to the point of rejection and beyond. Despite ample multistakeholder interaction with women who sponsored the bills, we observe that their connection with the media was lopsided.

It is important to note that the stakeholders studied here considered themselves more as intentional players who had a task to accomplish and followed spontaneous processes to achieve their goals. Even when they recognized that they were communicating politics in their own rights, they neither described their actions and/or inactions as political communication nor did they tag it as “feminist” even though they worked through the process with feminist organizations, among others.

### Policom of the women MP

We found that women members of parliament (MP) deploy liberal, soft power, and negotiation policom tactics. At the inception, they introduced subtle persuasion. They positioned themselves as the few women in parliament who are concerned with the plight of Nigerian women. Their presence at the plenaries became synonymous with gender issues and they were usually consulted and drafted to address gender issues whenever they arose on the floor of the House. These women would participate in rallies, speak at women's events, and media interviews about women's well-being. From their descriptions of their experiences as MPs, we found that the political parties lost the inclination to allow space for more women because the quota for token diversity was filled by these two women lawmakers among the few others.

In their use of liberal policom tactics, the women MP's documentations followed a sequence of data gathering, providing factual evidence drawn from women's history, global gender indexes, and national gender gaps which justify the bills and why it is simply logical for the government to respond to gender needs. Review meetings were set up at every stage of the bill readings, and NGOs and Academia supported the processes by predicting possible loopholes and suggesting plausible answers to the women MP who went to defend the bills.

As the readings proceeded, there were instances when step down was inevitable, even at that stage, the women MP retreated and deployed negotiation tactics where they went on a one-on-one lobbying of their colleagues on the floor of the House. Nkeiru Onyejocha shared her experience while lobbying fellow MPs:

Every time we talked about the 35% affirmative action, the men, colleagues of ours kept asking the question; whose seat do you want to take? Or who would give up his seat? So we decided to alter the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to ask for additional seats to be contested by only women. (PLAC, 2022a)

Speaking about her negotiations on the Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill, Senator Biodun Olujimi, avers that:

we got clerics together on this bill and they have worked for almost one year to put it where it is. We also got CAN [Christian Association of Nigeria] to look through it and they were all pleased. I think it's about a personal understanding of the issue and you see, like the Senate President said, only 109 people will vote on the bill and so we'll work on them again. I will come back stronger and better. (Channels TV, 2021)

At a roundtable meeting of electoral stakeholders on inclusivity in July 2021 (PLAC, 2021), Onyejocha explained to participants how she did one-on-one lobbying with her male colleagues, "some agreed to support the bill for additional seats, unfortunately, they withdrew at the last minute."

Overall, the women MP could not use radical policom. They opined that for them as internal players, harassment, protests, or pressuring their colleagues into passing the bills would have been counter-productive and the proposed bills might not have survived that long in the space to the extent of attracting public attention if they deployed any radical policom tactic.

### Policom of media organizations

As was noted earlier, media disposition to the gender bills was lopsided. We found that several media organizations embraced negotiation policom in their coverage and reportage of activities around the bill proposal. Many media organizations and online news platforms delighted in reporting and publishing issues around the gender bill, not because they were deemed important, but because the headlines attracted high readership, and ultimately increased purchase of the dailies. It resonates with the irony of how women's marginalization in politics is used as clickbait by Nigerian media (Omotoso, 2019).

### Policom of the NGOs

The NGOs took to a mix of liberal, negotiation, and soft power policom tactics in consonance with their nature of seeking radical change. Until the bills were rejected in March 2022, NGOs actively engaged in shaming those who had openly resented the bills, taking to the streets, and creating overlapping levels of resistance, both violent and non-violent. They also engaged in watching the trends, taking notes, speaking with data, writing petitions, mobilizing for online activism, and so on. In furtherance of the protest, the Governors' Wives Forum and women groups formed alliances and stormed the National Assembly in protest (TV360 Nigeria, 2022). They called for the lawmakers to rescind their decision on the bills. They argued that women's rights need to be recognized; these include rights to take leadership positions. Here, solidarity becomes a feminist policom tactic, with women speaking up and damning the consequences (Mohanty, 2003).

The utilization of these tactics did not follow a specific sequence, as the responses from stakeholders were spontaneous, driven by the hope of achieving their ultimate goals. That the rejection of the gender bills came at the onset of Women's Month was particularly disturbing. It conveyed lawmakers' insensitivity towards the global pursuit of SDG 5 and confirmed the presence of inherent tokenist tendencies that undermine gender egalitarianism within the system.

### Approaching gender egalitarianism in Nigeria: Concluding thoughts

By using the concept "Feminist African Political Communication" (Feminist Afropolicom), this study has provided insight into three specific steps taken to draw our conclusions: (1) foregrounding communicative experiences and tactics adopted by selected Nigerian women from ideation to the rejection of their proposed gender bills; (2) examining how the identified tactics addressed questions of agency, space, and power; and (3) interrogating how tokenism trumped women's political communication in the process. Within these three, we have established an unhealthy separation of political representation from political participation, which allows for the patriarchal political players to widen gaps among women consequently sustaining a trend of more women seen but few acting.

It becomes crucial to question why women failed to achieve their objectives despite skillfully employing the discussed policom tactics in this study. The contrasting outcomes raised important considerations about what happens when policom tactics fail to achieve their pre-defined objective as seen in the case of the rejected gender bills. This study reckons that even

in the absence of victory, Nigerian women, like their counterparts in many parts of Africa, have consistently found ways to assert their presence in public spheres (Sweetman, 1984; Tamaru & O'Reilly, 2018). Women's deployment of policom tactics in their various roles is power in itself. Their visibility and use of both verbal and non-verbal cues (Asabor, 2022), (See Figure 2, showing a woman using non-verbal cues with the inscriptions on her T-Shirt to protest the bills' rejection) demonstrate their intentional claim of space as a form of strategic communication. It emphasizes the importance of recognition since the policom tactics are "meaningful only through acts of recognition by others" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 161), even when the goals are yet to be achieved. It affirms that recognition is necessary to solidify an event's existence (Butler, 2018).

Just as poor soil hampers good seeds' growth, the bills' failure can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, most of the male MPs lack adequate gender literacy, implying tokenism might remain as long as women's policom is not understood by all parties engaged. Secondly, cultural, and religious apprehensions prevail, affecting both the political class and the grassroots who hold patriarchal mindsets that blind them to the benefits of gender egalitarianism. The implication here is that the "hairy-hairless" dichotomy breeding class-based barriers must be removed to allow for a more united feminist force. Thirdly, there is the challenge of translating online activism into tangible offline action, thus trivializing feminist Afropolicom strategies in cyberspace while also jeopardizing activist efforts of grassroots women in switched-off communities. As gender egalitarianism pursuits in Nigeria remains a



**Figure 2.** Women protesting through non-verbal cues. Retrieved March 10, 2022 from <https://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/306358/sad-as-lawmakers-disappoint-nigerian-women-a-week-to-inter.html>.

concern, this work does not provide definitive answers to the questions. However, it underscores the importance of women recognizing and refining their political communication skills. Additionally, it sheds light on the often overlooked and unnamed feminist policom tactics employed by women as part of the solution to address tokenism in Nigeria and perhaps across the Global South.

## Data availability

The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the supporting information of this article.

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## NOTES

1. "Detrimental agency" coined by Omotoso and Ogebor (2023) ensues when what is supposed to be a measure of strength becomes weaponized to promote weakness and foster oppression.
2. Nina Mba is one of Nigeria's prominent historians of women in politics. Her works was recently revisited by scholars to produce essays in her honor.

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