



Women's Leadership in Law in Nigeria



This report was produced by Co-Impact. Co-Impact brings together local changemakers and funders from around the world to make health, education, and economic systems stronger and more inclusive— creating impact that lasts. Our commitment to advancing gender equality and women's leadership is central to this goal.

A key part of our mission is advancing women's leadership and gender equality in law and economics. These fields play a powerful role in shaping public policy and determining how resources are allocated, decisions that ultimately affect people's rights and the quality of services they receive. Our goal is to not only see more women rise into leadership roles in institutions of economics, law, and justice, but also to ensure they are supported to lead with confidence, influence, and agency. We believe this is essential to building a more just and inclusive society.

This report is the last in a four-part series we commissioned in 2024 to examine women's journeys and leadership contributions within the fields of law and economics in Kenya and Nigeria. Through this series, we aim to deepen our understanding of women's lived experiences—including the barriers they face in navigating their careers and advancing to leadership positions where they can shape and influence the law and the economy. While this report is not intended to be a definitive research study, it seeks to complement and contribute to the growing body of work on women's leadership in law and economics in Africa.

We hope the stories and experiences featured here inspire you to see the promise and potential of a world where women lead as equal partners in advancing just, equitable, and inclusive societies.

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All photos and images used in the report are courtesy of Women Rights Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC) and were taken at the stakeholder validation roundtable on Women's Leadership in Nigeria's legal sector held in partnership with Co-Impact in Abuja in August 2025.

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Foreword

This report is part of a four-part series commissioned by Co-Impact in 2024 to deepen our understanding of women's leadership journeys in law and economics across Kenya and Nigeria. Grounded in evidence, these reports examine institutions spanning the Judiciary, Legislature, Attorney General's offices, academia, private firms, public economic institutions, banks, think tanks, professional bodies, and development organisations. They offer a comprehensive view of where women are leading, where gaps persist, and how institutional policy and societal factors shape women's entry, retention, and advancement.

At the current pace, the United Nations estimates it will take 140 years to achieve gender parity in workplace leadership and 47 years to reach equal representation in national parliaments.

In law and economics, women are graduating in strong numbers and building deep expertise, yet they remain underrepresented in leadership. These two domains matter because law shapes how rights are protected and justice is delivered, while economics determines how resources are allocated, which priorities are funded, and whose needs are reflected in national development strategies. Leadership in these fields influences the rules, incentives, and structures that affect millions.

The findings of these reports make clear that the issue is not a lack of talent or ambition. It is institutional.

Structural and informal barriers continue to shape how women advance and sustain leadership. Gender-blind appraisal systems, unequal access to mentorship and professional networks, workplace cultures that inadequately account for caregiving responsibilities, opaque promotion pathways, and entrenched leadership norms all contribute to unequal outcomes. In economics, women are disproportionately filtered out before

reaching senior technical and policy influence. In law, representation does not consistently translate into authority, visibility, or long-term retention at senior levels.

Importantly, these reports make one point clear: progress cannot be left to chance. At Co-Impact we believe that advancing women's leadership requires deliberate institutional reform. Symbolic representation is not enough. Institutions must move beyond compliance toward genuine transformation in reforming appraisal systems, reshaping workplace cultures, strengthening mentorship, dismantling informal power networks, and creating clear pathways for advancement. Only then will women not just enter leadership spaces but lead and thrive in them.

For funders and practitioners committed to systems change, this body of work highlights a critical opportunity. Investing in women's leadership in law and economics is not only a matter of equity; it is fundamental for durable institutional reform and inclusive development. When women lead, institutions become more responsive, governance becomes more legitimate, and policy decisions better reflect the realities of diverse communities.

We are deeply grateful for the leadership and long-term partnership of the Gates Foundation, whose sustained investment enables this work. We thank the authors for their rigorous research, the women who generously shared their experiences, and our partners across Kenya and Nigeria who continue advancing women's leadership.

We hope this body of work contributes meaningfully to evidence, dialogue, and collective action toward institutions in which women not only enter leadership spaces — but thrive and lead.

Mary Wandia
Co-Impact Regional Director, Africa.

Executive Summary

This study assesses the status of women leadership in law in Nigeria's legal profession against the current and historical context. Women's integration into Nigeria's legal profession follows the broader trajectory of systemic barriers acquired from colonial legacies that persist to date. Nigerian women continue to navigate the complexity of societal norms, access to education and legal frameworks to establish their presence in the legal profession.

Against this backdrop, the study interrogates the barriers for women leaders in law, examines the legal framework and institutional policies and regulations facilitating or undermining women's leadership, and identifies gender-intentional strategies and practices enhancing women's leadership in law in Nigeria.

Using a mixed-methods approach, it draws participants from all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, including 146 survey respondents, 19 in-depth interviews, and four focus group discussions exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of female legal practitioners. A stakeholder validation roundtable convened in August 2025 brought together key Nigerian legal stakeholders and women in law to engage with the preliminary findings, share insights, and provide recommendations, which have been incorporated into this report.

The study reveals the following major challenges and barriers limiting women's leadership in Nigeria's legal sector:

- Inadequate legal and policy framework to promote women's leadership and failure of implementation.
- Women's challenges with balancing work and family life.
- Gender discrimination and bias against women.
- Lack of mentorship and support systems for female judges.
- The limiting effect of intersecting federal character and indigeneity requirements for promotion.
- Societal and cultural barriers due to patriarchal orientation.
- Institutional barriers that limit women's career advancement.

It concludes by offering some key recommendations to promote women leadership in Nigeria's legal sector that include:

- Strengthening the institutional and policy framework through quota representation.
- Enabling institutional supports, including working environments and schedules that accommodate family life and career responsibilities.
- Strengthening existing networking and collaboration platforms among female lawyers to build solidarity and support systems for career advancement.

Findings from the study indicate the need to use multi-pronged approaches to address the intersectional challenges women face in the legal sector. These solutions will require key actors and actions from the government, legal professional organisations, civil society actors, women's groups, and male allies in the profession.



1 Introduction



From colonial legacies to contemporary strides, Nigerian women have navigated a complex interplay of societal norms, educational access, and legal frameworks to establish their presence in the legal domain. The trajectory of progress reflects a broader narrative of resilience and the gradual dismantling of systemic barriers.

During the colonial era, the legal profession in Nigeria was predominantly male, mirroring British legal traditions that marginalised women. The colonial administration imposed significant restrictions on women's access to legal education and professional opportunities. Women were relegated to domestic roles, limiting their exposure to formal education and by extension the legal profession (Institute for African Women in Law, 2023; A.N. Henry and E.F. Awoyera, 2017).^{1,2}

Despite these challenges some women found ways to break through entrenched barriers. Stella Jane Thomas was the first Nigerian woman called to the bar in Great Britain in 1933. Upon returning to Nigeria, she established a legal practice, and in 1943 she became the country's first female magistrate. Her achievements laid the groundwork for subsequent generations of women in law (T. Agunbiade, 2023).³ Modupe Omo-Eboh, another notable figure, was called to the English bar at Lincoln's Inn in 1953. She served in various legal capacities including Magistrate, Chief Magistrate and Director of Public Prosecutions, before her historic appointment as Nigeria's first female High Court judge in 1969 (F. Ajayi, 2025).⁴ Folake Solanke's journey further exemplifies the strides made by Nigerian women in law. Called to the bar in 1962, she became the first female Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN) in 1981. Her career encompassed roles in legal practice, public service and international advocacy, including serving as the first African International President of Zonta International.⁵

Access to legal education has been pivotal in facilitating women's entry into the legal profession. Institutions such as Queen's

College, Lagos and the University of Ibadan played significant roles in educating early female legal practitioners. However, societal expectations and limited resources often constrained women's educational pursuits. Over time, increased advocacy and policy reforms have expanded educational opportunities, enabling more women to pursue legal careers.

The global legal profession has historically been characterised by male dominance, with women facing significant barriers to entry and progression. Over the past century, however, there has been a gradual shift towards greater inclusion of women in legal education and practice (D.L. Rohde & L.B. Ricca, 2015).⁶ Despite these advancements, gender disparities persist, particularly in leadership roles within the legal sector. A longitudinal study by the International Bar Association examining gender disparity in law—using Uganda, Wales and Spain as case studies—found that despite increasing numbers of women qualifying as lawyers, only a small percentage reach the top levels of their profession (IBA, 2023).⁷

The Nigerian situation is no different. Recent studies have shown that female law students have reached numerical parity with their male counterparts in many law faculties in Nigeria (ibid.).⁸ However, this gender balance is not reflected at the highest levels of the profession.

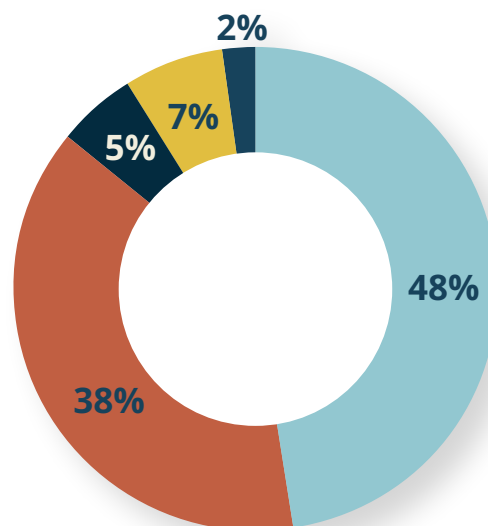
Only five of the 128 (3.9%) NBA branches in Nigeria are headed by women according to 2023 data from the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA). According to official 2024 NBA data, only 35 of the 720 Senior Advocates of Nigeria -SANs (5%) were women.

The underrepresentation of women in leadership and decision making roles in the Nigerian legal sector is supported by the 149 respondents who took part in the online survey. The majority either strongly agree (47.7%) or agree (38.3%) that women are underrepresented in leadership positions in Nigeria's legal sector, despite 72.5% and 22.1% respectively strongly agreeing or agreeing that women are as equally capable as their male counterparts (see figures 1 and 2). The implication of this is that the attainment of a leadership role has nothing to do with an individual's biological characteristics, but is largely determined by sociocultural biases.

The underrepresentation of females in senior legal positions in Nigeria can be attributed to frequently-recurring challenges such as sexual harassment, the misogynistic perception of female capacity in a largely patriarchal society, and professional inflexibility that fails to consider the equally vital role of females as primary caregivers (International Bar Association, 2023).⁹ A report from the Institute for African Women in Law suggests that institutional challenges in the workplace, such as unequal promotion policies, unequal pay and gender biases and stereotypes are still affecting women's ability to achieve leadership positions (ibid).¹⁰

1. RESPONDENT VIEWS ON WHETHER WOMEN ARE UNDERREPRESENTED IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS WITHIN THE NIGERIAN LEGAL SECTOR

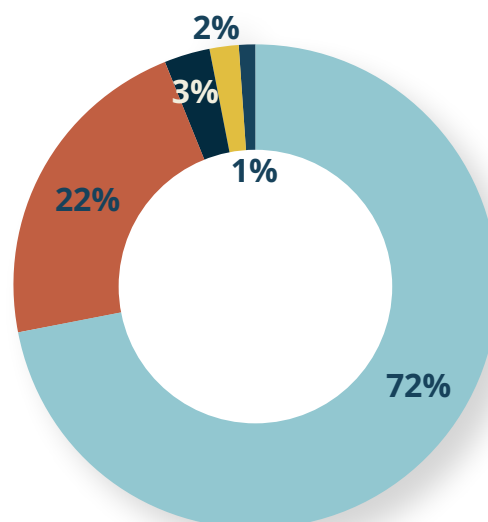
Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree



Source: Co-Impact and WARDC online survey on Women's Leadership in Nigeria's Legal Sector, 2025.

FIGURE 2: RESPONDENT VIEWS ON WHETHER WOMEN IN IN LEGAL LEADERSHIP ROLES ARE AS COMPETENT AS THEIR MALE COUNTERPARTS

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree



Source: Co-Impact and WARDC online survey on Women's Leadership in Nigeria's Legal Sector, 2025.

1.1 Women's Representation in Leadership in Key Legal Spheres

1.1.1 PUBLIC LEGAL INSTITUTIONS

While women are strongly represented in Nigeria's public legal sector, their representation diminishes at senior and leadership levels. For example, although women constitute approximately 40% of all lawyers in the country, they hold only about 33% of senior positions within the judiciary. In 2020 there were only 66 women (32%) and 138 men (68%) judicial officers in the Supreme Court and Court of Appeal (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022).¹¹ Two years later, women remained underrepresented in Nigeria's higher courts. They accounted for only five (28%) of the 13 Supreme Court justices, 23 (27%) of the 61 Court of Appeal judges, and 26 (35%) of the 74 Federal High Court judges—falling short of the 35% affirmative action benchmark set by Nigeria's National Gender Policy (NGP) for appointive positions. According to 2023 data from the International Bar Association, only four (10.8%) of the country's 37 State Attorneys General were women. (ibid).¹² To date, Nigeria has elected only two female chief justices since its independence in 1960.¹³

However, the overrepresentation of women at the lower levels of the judiciary also presents an opportunity. A respondent from Rivers State where women currently account for 21 out of 46 judges—approaching gender parity—attributed this positive shift to the significant presence of women in the lower bench, including the magistracy and the

Ministry of Justice. These entry points, often perceived as more suitable for women, have increasingly served as pipelines for elevation to the bench. As appointments are frequently drawn from these pools, the growing representation of women at lower levels has translated into higher numbers of women being appointed as judges.



In Rivers State, out of 46 judges, I think 21 are women—that's almost a 50-50 ratio. This shift is due to the high number of women in the lower bench, such as the magistracy and the Ministry of Justice. These pools, often overlooked, have now become launching pads for women's elevation. There's a perception that the lower bench is a 'woman's place', but that has actually turned in our favour. When judges are appointed from these spaces, the numbers naturally reflect more women.

KII: Judge of the High Court, Rivers State



1.1.2 LEGAL ACADEMIA

There has been notable progress in women's participation in legal education. Women now constitute a significant and increasing proportion of law students in Nigeria.¹⁴ They account for nearly 50% of law school enrollment nationwide and are topping bar examinations¹⁵ as evidenced by the last five years of Nigerian Law School results. (Muhammed, A. 2025)¹⁶. According to the International Bar Association's report, 50:50 by 2030: A Longitudinal Study into Gender Disparity in Law¹⁷ Nigerian Law School¹⁸ enrollment data for the 2017/18 academic year show that in some campuses, such as Abuja (60.4%) and Enugu (57.6%), female students being admitted to the Bar increasingly outnumbered their male counterparts. However this trend was not uniform across all campuses; in Lagos for example, women accounted for only 40.2% of those admitted to the Bar during the same period.^[16]

Despite increased entry of women into legal training, they remain significantly underrepresented in senior academic and leadership roles, including positions such as professors and deans. Patriarchal institutional cultures within universities contribute to power imbalances, limiting women's advancement into these higher-level positions.

The precise ratio of male to female lecturers in Nigerian university law faculties is not

known. However, a 2023 study by the Institute for African Women in Law (IAWL) examining six well-respected law faculties across Nigeria found that women constituted an average of only 18.9% of law academics. The study also showed that women's representation declines at higher academic ranks. Southern states such as Enugu, Edo, and Lagos have relatively higher numbers of female legal academics, while institutions in Northern states record lower representation, largely due to sociocultural barriers, limited institutional support, and conservative gender norms that further hinder women's academic progression (IAWL, Nigeria Legal Academy Report 2023).¹⁹

A similar pattern is seen in data gathered by the researchers in 2025 for this study, which covered nine select law faculties across Nigeria's geopolitical zones (see table 1). The highest proportion of women was recorded at Lead City University, a private third-generation institution in Oyo State, where women constituted 26% of senior academic staff. In contrast, significantly lower levels of women's representation in legal academia were observed in parts of Northern Nigeria. At the American University in Adamawa, a private third-generation institution, women made up only 12% of senior faculty. Gombe State University, a public institution in Northern Nigeria, reported no female academics in senior faculty positions.

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TABLE 1: LEADERSHIP BY GENDER IN SELECT NIGERIAN FACULTIES OF LAW

S/N	NAME OF INSTITUTION	LOCATION	TOTAL N° OF STAFF	NUMBERS OF STAFF IN SENIOR POSITIONS BY GENDER (M:F) SENIOR POSITION ²⁰
1	Lead City University	Ibadan Oyo State	23	7:6
2	Obafemi Awolowo University	Ile-Ife Osun State	37	20:8
3	Ahmadu Bello University	Zaria Kaduna State	53	32:6
4	Nasarawa State University	Keffi Nasarawa State	26	14:6
5	University of Maiduguri	Maiduguri Borno State	36	18:3
6	Bayero University	Kano, Kano State	49	24:6
7	American University of Nigeria	Yola Adamawa State	17	14:2
8	Gombe State University	Gombe, Gombe State	13	3:0
9	Redeemer University	Ede, Osun State	17	5:1

Source: Co-Impact and WARDC institutional mapping of selected Nigerian law faculties across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, 2025.

A significant number of Nigeria's 55 accredited Faculties of Law have adopted gender-equality and gender-sensitive policies—such as Equal Opportunity policies, as well as Sexual Harassment and Sexual and Romantic Relationship policies—to promote inclusion and accountability (WARDC, 2023).²¹ However, the existence of these frameworks has not yet translated into substantive progress for women, as evidenced by the persistence of harassment cases that frequently surface in the public domain.^[8] What remains to be seen is the translation of these intentions into real shifts in culture, mindsets and everyday practices within institutions (Kigotho, 2025).²²

Women in legal academia also face intersecting barriers linked to marital status, caregiving responsibilities, ethnicity, religion, and class. Research shows that women experience a “steep drop-off” in career progression as academic rank increases, often due to promotion criteria that fail to account for care burdens, unequal access to mentorship, and informal power networks dominated by men (Olaogun et. al, 2025).²³

Women who belong to ethnic or religious minorities, or women seeking employment in their husband's state of origin, may face additional discrimination during recruitment and promotion processes, regardless of their competence or performance (Dawuni, J, 2021).²⁴ Although Citizens of Nigeria by section 42 of the Constitution are protected

from sex discrimination, there are exceptions, which are grounded on indigeneship policies that classify women as ‘natives’ of a specific state based on their lineage and state of origin, meaning that even if they're residing in their husband's state of origin they may still suffer discrimination for marrying out of their state of origin. The women's movement has been advocating for constitutional reforms to mitigate this. Unfortunately, it has failed to pass in several legislative and executive constitutional review processes.²⁵

Institutional discrimination in law faculties often operates through subtle practices. Women are frequently overlooked for leadership roles due to non-transparent selection processes, favoritism, and gender stereotypes that portray men as better suited for management and administrative positions. They may also be excluded from influential mentoring networks, denied access to important information, and left out of income-generating or high-visibility opportunities, such as grant collaborations and other key academic assignments. In its more than 60-year history, the Nigerian Law School had never appointed a female Director-General until January 2026. This milestone underscores the deeply entrenched gender disparities in institutional leadership.²⁶

Moreover, women face barriers to securing research funding and to publication opportunities, further hindering their career



Co-Impact and WARDC Stakeholder Validation Roundtable on Women's Leadership in Nigeria's Legal Sector, Abuja, August 2025.

advancement. The cumulative effect of these practices is a persistent gender gap in academic and professional legal circles, limiting diverse perspectives and equitable policy development.^{27,28}

The implications of this exclusion are far-reaching. Faculties of Law shape the future of Nigeria's justice system by training lawyers, judges, policymakers, and legal scholars. When women are systematically excluded from senior academic and leadership roles, gender bias is reproduced across legal education, legal practice, and justice delivery. This undermines efforts toward inclusive governance, gender-responsive lawmaking, and equitable access to justice, particularly for women and other marginalized groups.

Despite growing recognition of these challenges, data gaps remain a critical constraint. Existing studies are limited in scope and geography, making it difficult to fully understand how intersectional factors operate across Nigeria's diverse legal institutions. The dearth of comprehensive research calls for a holistic, nationally representative diagnostic study that captures regional, institutional, and socio-cultural variations affecting women's leadership trajectories in legal academia.

1.1.3 PRIVATE LEGAL SECTOR

In Nigeria, women lawyers face significant challenges in private legal practice, particularly at higher levels of seniority and in partnership roles. While there's been progress in terms of women entering the legal profession and even some success stories in the judiciary, systemic biases, gendered perceptions and lack of support structures continue to hinder their advancement in private legal practice. Litigation, a crucial aspect of legal practice, is often perceived as 'men's work' leading to reluctance in hiring and promoting women. Another major concern is the prevalence of sexual harassment and violence against female lawyers in law firms, which creates a hostile and unsafe work environment and undermines their professional advancement. In addition, female lawyers are often paid less than their male counterparts for the same work. Furthermore, female lawyers tend to specialise in civil (family and business law), compared to their male counterparts who often take the perceived lucrative areas such as criminal, property and electoral litigation cases. Also, deep-rooted gender biases and stereotypes create barriers for women in securing clients, getting promoted, and being taken seriously by colleagues and clients.

TABLE 2: WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN A SELECTION OF LAW FIRMS IN LAGOS²⁹

	NAME OF LAW FIRM	YEAR OF ESTABLISHMENT	TOTAL NO OF LAWYERS IN THE FIRM	RATIO OF PRINCIPAL PARTNERS BY GENDER (M/F)	RATIO OF SENIOR STAFF BY GENDER (M: F)
1	Olaniwun Ajayi LP	1962	67	2:0	14:8
2	Banwo and Ighodalo	1992	74	3:0	10:7
3	Adepetun, Caxton Martins, Agbor and Segun (ACAS-LAW)	1991	67	2:2	5:8
4	Templars	1995	136	2:0	11:8
5	Aluko and Oyeboode	1993	85	2:0	15:12
6	Aelix Law Firm	2004	50	5:1	9:2
7	Kenna and Partners	1993	45	4:0	5:2
8	Udo Udoma and Bello Osagie	1983	77	4:1	8:8
9	Idowu Sofola and Co	1975	13	2:0	1:1
10	Jackson, Etti and Edu	1996	52	3:0	5:6
11	G. Elias	1994	63	1:0	6:2
12	Olajide Oyewole LLP	1965	28	2:0	5:2
13	Duale, Ovia and Alex - Adedipe	2015	44	3:0	3:3
14	Wole Olanipekun and Co	1980	26	2:0	8:0
15	A02 LAW	2017	21	2:2	3:1

Source: Co-Impact and WARDC institutional mapping of selected Nigerian Law faculties across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, 2025

1.1.4 THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

The 2023 elections saw a decline in women's representation compared to previous assemblies. Nigeria's low global ranking in terms of the number of women representatives in parliament is a significant concern. Some Inter-Parliamentary Union reports indicate

Nigeria has one of the lowest rates of female representation in Africa. In the current 10th Assembly, female lawmakers occupy only four of the 109 Senate seats (4%) and 16 of the 360 seats in the House of Representatives (4%), bringing total female representation in the 469-member Assembly to just 4%.

**TABLE 3: WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION
IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**

CHAMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	FEMALE	MALE
Senate	109	04 seats (4%)	105 seats (96%)
House of Representatives	360	16 seats (4%)	344 seats (96%)
Total	469	20 seats (4%)	449 seats (96%)

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 'Women in National Parliaments – Nigeria' (2023 data) and official records of the 10th National Assembly of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2023–2027).

Conclusions from situation analysis

From the situation analysis data it is evident that the underrepresentation of women in senior legal roles in Nigeria, similar to other African countries, reflects broader challenges including institutional barriers, legal constraints, patriarchal norms and systemic barriers. Addressing these challenges is crucial for ensuring that the legal system is representative and responsive to the needs of all citizens.



Co-Impact and WARDC Stakeholder Validation Roundtable on Women's Leadership

2 Purpose of the Research



Gender equality in the legal profession is not only a matter of fairness, but also essential for the effective administration of justice.

A diverse legal workforce brings varied perspectives, which can enhance the quality of legal reasoning and decision-making. Moreover, the presence of women in legal leadership positions serves as a catalyst for broader societal change, challenging traditional gender roles and promoting equality. Thus, women's representation in the legal sector is crucial because of the legal system's unique role in addressing gender-based discrimination. In addition, based on their unique perspectives, women's participation and leadership in the justice system can play a valuable role in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), specifically goal five on gender equality.

This study sought to assess women's positioning within the legal profession in Nigeria and interrogate the barriers impeding greater female leadership in law. It examines the legal framework and institutional policies and regulations that facilitate or undermine women's leadership in law in Nigeria. It uses this analysis to identify gender-intentional strategies and practices that can be leveraged to enhance women's leadership in Nigeria's legal sector.

2.1. Methodology

The study utilised mixed methods. In addition to a desk review of previous studies, secondary reports, official documents, and relevant conceptual frameworks, the researchers administered an online questionnaire.

Online Questionnaire:

The questionnaire was completed by 146 respondents drawn from all the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Nigeria. It explored themes relating to the specific objectives of the study.

Focus Group Discussions:

- Four focus group discussions were conducted with stakeholders drawn from different interest groups:
- A women's group drawn mostly from members of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) and FIDA Nigeria (one group)
- Participants from academic institutions comprising lecturers and students from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, University of Lagos and the Lead City University, Ibadan, Oyo State (two groups)
- Participants from selected private firms, including male lawyers (one group).
- The group sizes ranged from six to 21.

In-depth interviews:

In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 respondents selected from professional groups, the judiciary, academic institutions and supporting partners. The interview guide explored thematic issues around women's leadership, opportunities, challenges, resources, and capacity building for leadership development and networking.



Overall sample profile

Participants in the study were drawn from institutions categorised by Co-Impact as follows:

- **Critical institutions** – institutions that influence public policy, resource allocation, national priorities, legal and justice administration, such as Ministries of Justice, the Judiciary, and Directorates of Public Prosecution.
- **Pipeline institutions** – such as universities that serve as the main feeders for the critical institutions in the areas of human resource production and development.
- **Supporting institutions** – organisations that serve the constituencies, such as professional associations or networks or convening agencies, and that create formal and informal pathways into the critical institutions, for example professional associations and networks of lawyers.
- **Others** – such as accountability organisations, and behavioural law firms that use nudge techniques to change institutional practices like hiring, regulation, retention, and professional development.

Roundtable discussion

In addition, a roundtable was organised in Abuja in August 2025 with selected stakeholders drawn from various interest groups. The roundtable provoked conversations around women's leadership, mentorship, resource mobilisation, capacity building for leadership, knowledge sharing, advocacy, networking, opportunities and challenges, among other themes. Insights obtained from the roundtable validated the key findings of the field study and further strengthened this report.



Co-Impact and WARDC Stakeholder Validation Roundtable on Women's Leadership in Nigeria's Legal Sector, Abuja, August 2025

TABLE 4: CATEGORISATION AND INSTITUTIONAL MAPPING OF RESPONDENTS

CATEGORISATION	NAME OF INSTITUTIONS	LOCATIONS
Critical institutions	National Industrial Court	Abuja
	Federal High Court	Abuja
	Office of Public Defender	Rivers State
	Ministry of Justice	Borno State
	Ministry of Justice (Chief Judge)	Nasarawa State
	Gender Court Judge, State Judiciary	Plateau State
	High Court Judge, State Judiciary	Jigawa State
	Chief Judge, State Judiciary	Bauchi State
	High Court Judge	Rivers State
Academic institutions	Faculty of Law, University of Lagos	Lagos State
	Obafemi Awolowo University	Ile-Ife, Osun State
	Lead City University	Ibadan, Oyo State
	Faculty of Law, Veritas University	Abuja, FCT
Supporting institutions	Nigeria Bar Association (NBA)	National and State Chapters
	FIDA- Nigeria	National and State Chapters
	Public Complaints Commission	Lagos State
	National Human Rights Commission	Lagos State
	Independent Electoral Commission	Abuja
Others	Nigeria Sovereign Investment Authority	Abuja
	Nigeria Midstream and Downstream Petroleum Regulatory Authority	Abuja
	Private Law Firms	Nationwide

Source: Co-Impact and WARDC institutional mapping of selected Nigerian Law faculties across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, 2025

2.2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

By connecting the study to established theories and concepts, the theoretical framework provides a foundation for understanding the key findings and insights from the study and strengthens its credibility. In addition, the theoretical and conceptual framework builds the study upon existing knowledge and contributes to the scholarly conversation in a meaningful way. The scoping research is situated at the intersection of role congruity theory, patriarchy and intersectionality theory.

Role congruity theory, introduced by Alice Eagly and Steven Karau in 2002, explores the relationship between societal expectations of gender roles and the perceived suitability of individuals for certain roles.³⁰

Role congruity theory offers a compelling framework for understanding the pervasive challenges women face in leadership positions. This theory posits that prejudice against women leaders arises from the perceived incongruity between the characteristics typically associated with women and the demands of leadership roles. Traditionally, leadership roles have been strongly associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness, dominance and competitiveness. Conversely, women are often stereotyped as being more communal, emphasising nurturing, empathy and cooperation.^{31,32}

The gender bias against women within the legal profession has been thoroughly examined by feminist legal scholars studying how power is transferred into the processes by which laws are made, interpreted, enforced, and amended, especially by a



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certain group of people, namely those who compose the patriarchal institution of law.³³ In this sense, the legal culture is viewed as a patriarchal institution. The major conflicts for female lawyers in the United States, according to Cynthia Bowman, are the femininity of female lawyers and masculinity of legal culture, which female lawyers need to confront.³⁴ These conflicts have created a 'paradox' and 'double-bind' dilemma.. In adapting to the masculine legal profession, women lawyers find themselves caught in the dilemma of the 'double-bind', which dictates that women who model themselves upon the stereotypical image of an attorney risk 'being accused of inappropriate aggressiveness'.³⁵ In other words, the conflict for women in law originates from their femininity, and such a thesis is linked to a rigid gender dichotomy. Shu-Chin further examines the impact of gender stereotypes on the segregation of judges and prosecutors, as female trainees are more likely to choose to become judges rather than prosecutors.³⁶ For her, gender stereotypes, such as those that depict passive and conciliatory women, have an impact on the segregation of judges and prosecutors. This is especially true when trainees have completed their training

programme and face a choice between these two positions. Since judges primarily stay inside offices and courtrooms, they are associated with more feminine attributes, such as patience and passivity. In contrast, prosecutors must be outgoing and deal with hectic outside situations involving detectives and policemen.³⁷ Except for some young women who see it as a real challenge to be relatively 'outgoing' prosecutors, most female judicial interns prefer to be judges instead of prosecutors. In fact, women are frequently advised that being judges would be more comfortable for them for balancing family and judicial tasks. In other words, their choices are made according to the gender stereotypes surrounding the gendered division of labour. The two occupations of judge and prosecutor are gendered by the contents of their respective tasks: a judge requires a more feminine character, while a prosecutor requires a more masculine one. Moreover, the occupational decision one makes, to become either a judge, prosecutor, or lawyer, is made with consideration for the balance between one's domestic life and career responsibilities.

The ideological and cultural background of patriarchy is a very strong determinant of the clinch of male supremacy over female and

this explains why a man is regarded as one who remains in the home in order to retain the family name, while a woman is married out and as such attracts discrimination and deprivation of access to all opportunities and benefits in the family³⁸. Thus, men are being trained for leadership roles, while women are confined to domestic activities; roles ascribed to them by culture which affect them later in life, leading to loss of their self-confidence and to low self-esteem in their career in adult life, politics inclusive³⁹.

Patriarchal structure has been a major feature of African society. It is a structure of a set of social relations with a material base which enables men to dominate women⁴⁰. It is a system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the role and activities of women.

The concept of intersectionality has become pivotal in understanding the compounded forms of discrimination faced by Nigerian women in law. Johnson⁴¹ explores how Section 42 of Nigeria's Constitution can be leveraged to protect women with intersecting

identities, such as disability, ethnicity, and religion. The study emphasises that women at these intersections experience unique challenges that are not adequately addressed by laws focusing on single-issue categories. Intersectionality helps us to understand how interconnected identities, interests, and opportunities impact the advancement of women in the legal profession who embody these different identities. As a lawyer and judge, a woman is intersectional, given that she has to navigate several identity markers that characterise her, including gender, ethnicity, state of origin, access to education, socioeconomic status, and religion. Thus, in this report the intersectionality theory explores the implications of the peculiar nature and impact of the multi-ethnic and multicultural environment for women's judicial career progression in Nigeria. Ekhatior⁴² further examines the intersection of culture and gender relations, discussing how traditional beliefs and practices exacerbate the marginalisation of women in the legal profession. The study highlights that cultural norms often dictate Nigerian women's roles and behaviours, influencing their participation and progression within the legal field.



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3 Discussion of Findings



3.1 Barriers impeding women's attainment and retention of leadership in Nigeria's Legal Sector

3.1.1. LEGAL AND POLICY BARRIERS

A gender analysis of Nigeria's local laws and policies reveals legal instruments that are either overtly discriminatory or, at best, gender blind. Women's rights in Nigeria have been systematically undermined from the constitution and criminal code to local edicts and customary laws. Violations of women's rights are further complicated by the existence of three legal systems –English Law, Customary Law and Sharia Law. Nigeria's legal systems have had complex implications for women's participation in the legal profession. Customary laws, deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions, often limited women's rights and access to legal recourse. Conversely, statutory laws, influenced by British legal frameworks, provided more egalitarian principles.

One consequence of Nigeria's tripartite legal system is the existence of numerous gender-insensitive local laws that are poorly documented and difficult to monitor. Efforts to advocate for their repeal are further complicated by the federal structure, which grants significant autonomy to individual

states.⁴³ . The tension between these systems has necessitated ongoing legal reforms and advocacy to harmonise laws and promote gender equality within the legal profession.

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was modelled after the 1979 constitution which represents the fountainhead of the federal character principle. The constitution stipulates that access to positions and opportunities at federal, state and local government levels will be distributed on the basis of 'federal character'. Thus the constitution holds in principle that benefits of the federal character are only applicable to indigenes of a particular state or locality. The various ethnic groups had to receive assurance that they were uniquely catered for in the provisions of the new democracy that was to emerge from the ruins of the civil war. The application of the federal character principle has been used to deny appointment of female Justices of the Courts of Appeal in the states of their husbands.

The inability of women to claim their husband's state of origin where they have lived and served, to attain leadership positions, such as the chief judge of the state, and be promoted to the higher courts, such as the Court of Appeal or the Supreme Court, is an act of discrimination. However, it is not only gender-based, as it relates to wider issues of citizenship versus an indigene-ship question that is at the heart of the 'residency or national' question in Nigeria and yet to be adequately addressed.⁴⁴ Being an 'indigene' confers access to political, economic and cultural benefits. It also has implications on whether a person is qualified to run for public office or occupy a leadership position. Therefore, some female judges are denied the position of chief judge even when they are the most senior judge in their husband's state. The concept of 'indigene-ship' has been considered as introducing a two-tier citizenship in Nigeria that confers benefits to some and robs others of any public benefits despite having residency and paying taxes to the local authority in the state.⁴⁵

For example, in 2012, the then Chief Justice of Nigeria, Justice Aloma Muktar, declined to swear in Hon. Ifeoma Jumbo-Ofo as Justice



The legal profession historically has been dominated by the male folks. From the colonial era, it has been predominantly male, mirroring the British legal tradition that marginalised women's participation. In the same vein, globally, the history of women in the legal profession has been one of persistent struggle and prejudice.

(Excerpt from the keynote address by Professor Oluyemisi Adefunke Bamgbose, SAN, at the stakeholder validation roundtable)

of the Court of Appeal on the basis of her state of origin despite the intervention of the National Judicial Commission (NJC). Justice Jombo-Ofo hails from Anambra state and had served for 14 years in the judiciary of Abia, her husband's home state..⁴⁶ A similar scenario played out in Cross River state where the NJC interviewed two judges - Justice Akon Ikpeme, a woman and Justice Maurice Eneji, a man - for the post of Chief Judge of the state. After the interview, the verdict was that Justice Akon Ikpeme was the preferred candidate while Justice Eneji was the reserve candidate. At the end of the day, Justice Ikpeme was sworn-in as acting Judge.⁴⁷ Her confirmation as substantive Chief Judge was said to have been declined by the Cross River State House of Assembly on the grounds that she could become a 'security risk' to the state because of her ties with Akwa Ibom state. This was when Justice Ikpeme had already served for three months as Chief Judge in an acting capacity in Cross River state. This situation generated controversy among the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) and the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Nigeria. Justice Ikpeme's husband is from Cross River state while she is from neighbouring Akwa Ibom state. Both were considered to be one state until September 23, 1987 when Akwa Ibom was carved out of Cross River state.

The same issues affected the appointment of Justice Patricia Mahmoud. Her appointment as the Acting Chief Judge of Kano state in January 2015 was marred by controversies because she is from Benue state but got married in Kano state – despite decades

of service in the Kano state judiciary. Her nomination to the Court of Appeal was equally opposed by Kano state authorities who invoked the Federal Character principle. They were not pleased at the prospect of Justice Patricia claiming Kano's slot at the Appellate Court.⁴⁸

The Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill represents a critical legislative effort to address gender discrimination comprehensively. Introduced to promote equal rights and opportunities for women, the bill has encountered opposition rooted in cultural and religious concerns. Critics argue that it contradicts traditional values and could lead to unintended consequences. For instance, some lawmakers perceive the bill as promoting abortion and undermining family structures.⁴⁹ This resistance has hindered the bill's passage, underscoring the need for continuous advocacy and dialogue to reconcile legal reforms with societal values.



Nigeria currently lacks a robust legal framework that promotes gender equality in leadership. Affirmative action, when embedded in law, can create real opportunities for women to thrive. Without deliberate policies, the playing field remains tilted. The gender equality bill should be ratified without further delay to provide enforcement power for all the existing policies and declarations subscribed to by Nigeria.

Key informant.





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Roundtable discussions emphasised how imperative it is to advocate for the rigorous enforcement of existing gender equality laws and policies, including the National Gender Policy and the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act. The primary challenge in achieving gender equality is often not the absence of laws, but their implementation. Therefore, efforts must be directed towards ensuring full compliance, effective enforcement, and accountability.

3.1.2. SOCIETAL AND CULTURAL-LEVEL BARRIERS

Socioeconomic disparities exacerbate the challenges faced by women in Nigeria's legal sector, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds. These women encounter significant barriers, including limited access to quality education, financial constraints, and reduced exposure to professional networks, which hinder their ability to pursue legal careers and effectively compete within the profession. According to Okorafor et al.⁵⁰ women in lower-income brackets often struggle to access the same educational resources and career opportunities as their wealthier counterparts, which impacts their professional growth. Odusanya⁵¹ further highlights that these women frequently lack the financial resources necessary to afford law school or attend critical networking events, which reduces their chances of breaking into and advancing within the legal field.



Active legal practice involves extensive travel and mental effort. While women can succeed in it, they face additional hurdles due to family responsibilities. Balancing litigation with home life is a major concern, and many women avoid it for this reason. Societal pressures, the demanding nature of private practice, and the perception that women cannot handle its intensity all play a role. Women are more frequently found in the magistracy or public service roles due to family pressure to pursue less stressful paths. Economic factors also contribute. In public service, there's job security, defined working hours, and steady career progression. In contrast, private practice is unpredictable and highly competitive.

(Focus group discussion, Lagos, Nigeria)
Work-life balance remains a persistent

challenge for Nigerian women, who often bear the brunt of domestic responsibilities alongside their professional obligations⁵². While organisations may promote gender inclusivity, structural and cultural expectations continue to hinder women's career advancement. This reality is particularly evident among female lawyers in Nigeria, who frequently struggle to meet the demanding hours of legal practice while managing familial duties. These dual burdens can limit their access to leadership roles, reduce their competitiveness, and contribute to higher attrition rates within the profession, thereby perpetuating gender imbalances in the legal sector.



Age-old societal obstacles such as the Nigerian patriarchal culture socialise girls toward traditional roles and often unconsciously devalue women's career ambitions. A troubling fact is that many Nigerians still expect women to aspire to marry rather than pursue professional excellence. Such mindsets persist within families, in law firms, courtrooms, and any angle to which a female legal practitioner turns to.

(Excerpt from Keynote address by Professor Oluyemisi Adefunke Bamgbose, SAN, at the stakeholder validation roundtable)

Women are often assigned primary caregiving roles through cultural expectation, making it difficult to commit to the demanding schedules typical of legal practice. The absence of supportive workplace policies, such as flexible working hours and adequate maternity leave, compounds this issue.⁵³



From the public legal sector, specifically the Ministry of Justice, about 60% of the workforce is female. Most of these women don't practice privately. In private legal practice, you find far fewer women. The public sector offers a more predictable career path—moving from officer to director, and potentially to the bench—making it a more appealing and manageable option for many women.

Private legal practice is rigorous. It demands resilience, mobility, and time—factors that make it challenging for many women, especially those balancing family responsibilities. Thriving in this space requires significant strength and sacrifice.

(Focus group discussion, Obafemi University, Ile-Ife)





We live in a patriarchal society. Female lawyers are often perceived as too outspoken or authoritative, and this challenges traditional expectations of women being submissive. Society tends to believe that women who are lawyers cannot be good wives because of their assertiveness. Society often expects women to be submissive, not authoritative. Thus, when a female lawyer or judge asserts herself, people may feel uncomfortable.

(Focus group discussion, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife)

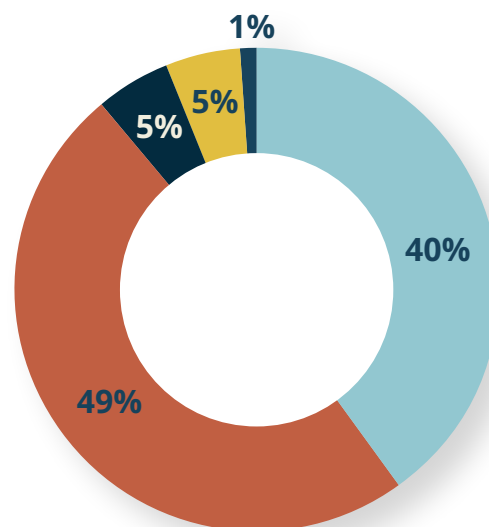


Juggling career and motherhood was no small feat. That was my biggest challenge. Practicing law with young children was hard. Yet, family support made all the difference. My husband took care of school pickups while I did the morning school runs. I had nannies, and my mother helped. It wasn't easy, but God helped me. Still, gender bias lingered. There were times people saw me and assumed I'd be a walkover in court. That didn't last. Eventually, they realised I wasn't to be taken for granted.

KII: Judge of the High Court, Rivers State

FIGURE 3: WORK-LIFE BALANCE PRESSURES DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECT WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PROGRESSION IN LAW

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree



Source: Co-Impact and WARDC online survey on women's leadership in Nigeria's legal sector, 2025.

Figure 3 shows that the majority of the respondents either agree or strongly agree (49% and 40% respectively) that work-life balance pressures disproportionately affect women's leadership progression in law.

Societal pressures can discourage women from pursuing ambitious career paths, especially when such pursuits are perceived to conflict with traditional family roles.⁵⁴ This tension between professional aspirations and cultural expectations leads to higher attrition rates among women in the legal profession, particularly during childbearing years. The lack of institutional support for work-life balance not only hinders individual career progression but also deprives the legal sector of diverse perspectives and talents.

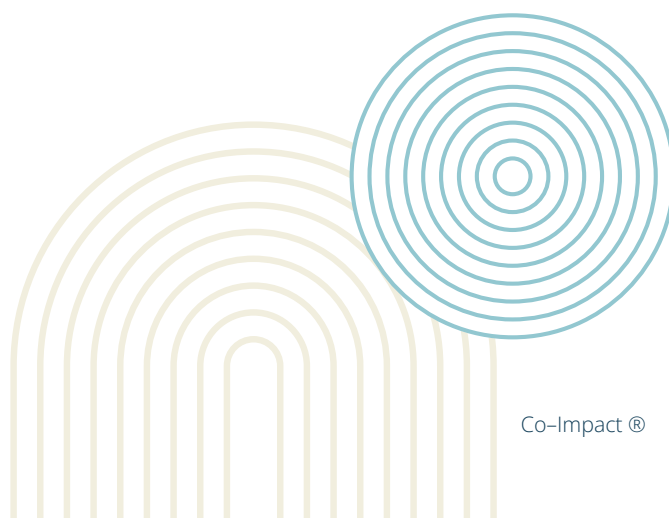
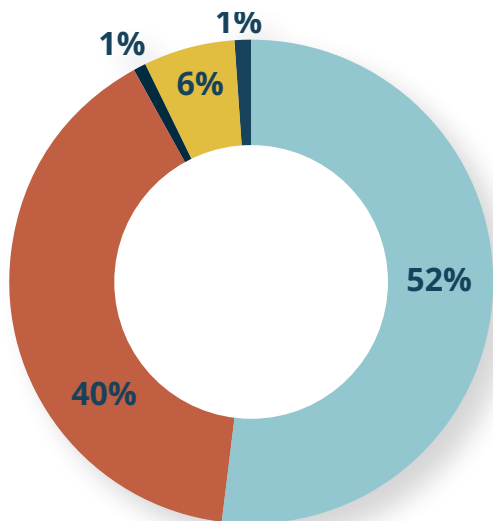


FIGURE 4: CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL FACTORS LIMIT WOMEN'S RISE TO LEADERSHIP IN LAW

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree



Source: Co-Impact and WARDC online survey on women's leadership in Nigeria's legal sector, 2025.

Figure 4 shows almost unanimous support for the view (91.3%) that cultural and societal facts limit women's rise to leadership positions in the legal sector.



Today's culture demands a woman be both a full-time housewife and a full-time professional. The expectation to perform both roles perfectly is unrealistic. Unless a woman has a highly supportive partner willing to share responsibilities, it's difficult to balance both. Many women are forced to either delay their careers or start over later in life, often playing catch-up with their younger peers. The solution lies in addressing societal norms and creating supportive structures that allow women to thrive both professionally and personally.

(Focus group discussion, Lagos FIDA and Women Group)



I know women who had to quit law or scale back their careers to maintain their marriages. In some cases, men won't marry a woman unless she agrees to stop practicing law. That doesn't make her less of a lawyer—but it shows the sacrifices women are forced to make due to societal expectations. (In-depth interview, Lagos)

Moreover, regional disparities and cultural practices such as early marriage and restrictions on women's mobility continue to impede women's educational and professional advancement in Northern Nigeria. These factors limit women's access to opportunities in the legal field⁵⁵. There is a need for policies promoting educational access and financial support to address these challenges⁵⁶. The International Bar Association advocates for cultural reforms to ensure equitable participation of women in the legal profession.⁵⁷ Addressing these socioeconomic factors requires comprehensive policies aimed at promoting educational access, financial support and cultural change to enable equitable participation of women in the legal profession.

3.1.3. INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

Gender discrimination and unconscious bias remain pervasive within Nigeria's legal and justice sector institutions. Women often encounter subtle and overt forms of bias that question their competence and suitability for leadership roles. Such biases manifest in hiring practices, case assignments and promotional opportunities. These disparities are not solely due to overt discrimination but also stem from ingrained societal perceptions that view women as less capable in high-stakes legal matters. Unconscious biases influence decision-making processes, often to the detriment of female legal professionals. The lack of institutional mechanisms to address these biases further exacerbates the issue, leading to a cycle of underrepresentation and limited advancement opportunities for women in law.⁵⁸



The cost of the SAN59 application is a significant barrier, particularly for women. The non-refundable application fee of one million naira, excluding other expenses required to meet the necessary standards, such as office and library upgrades. While some male colleagues resort to loans or support from peers, many women view these challenges as insurmountable, limiting their participation. Early preparation for competitive distinguished honour for the legal Profession (SAN) is critical and women must do more to earn this honour than men.

(In-depth interview, female SAN)



It is believed that the legal profession has masculine traditions and ethos, which are contradictory to the societal stereotypes defined for women. For example, in the judiciary, both male and female judges are addressed as His Lordship. Why not Her Lordship for female judges? That, in itself, suggests a bias.

(Focus group discussion, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife)



Traditionally, the legal profession is masculine in orientation. If you look at the judges of the supreme court when they are seated, the kind of robe they put on, the way people address them, my lord, your worship, and this and that. There is something intrinsically about the legal profession itself that makes it masculine in orientation. It tends towards enhancing the male superiority in the legal profession itself. Its practices, traditions, and all that....They all tend towards masculinity.

(Focus group discussion, male lawyer, Lagos)

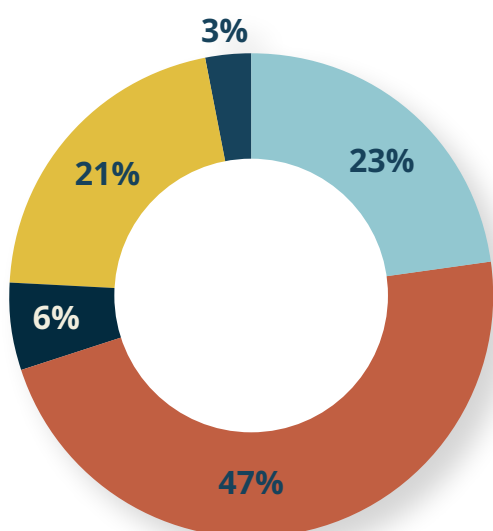
Mentorship and networking are critical components of career development in the legal field⁶⁰. However, female lawyers in Nigeria often lack access to these resources. The scarcity of female mentors, particularly in senior positions, limits opportunities for guidance and professional growth. Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive strategies to enhance access to legal education, provide financial support, and create more inclusive professional networks to support the career progression of women from lower-income backgrounds in Nigeria's legal sector. This would help ensure greater gender equity and representation in legal practice and leadership roles.

Figure 5 shows that respondents either agree (47.7%) or strongly agree (22.8%) that women face limited access to mentorship and leadership opportunities in law. Informal networks that facilitate career advancement are frequently male-dominated, making it challenging for women to integrate and benefit from these connections. This lack of mentorship and networking opportunities contributes to a cycle of underrepresentation,

where the absence of women in leadership roles perpetuates the scarcity of mentors for the next generation. Institutional efforts to establish formal mentorship programmes and inclusive networking events are essential to address this gap and promote gender equity within the legal profession.

FIGURE 5: WOMEN FACE LIMITED ACCESS TO MENTORSHIP AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES IN LAW

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree



Source: Co-Impact and WARDC online survey on women's leadership in Nigeria's legal sector, 2025.



Discrimination exists not just in society but within the legal profession itself. Most private legal practitioners are men, while women are largely concentrated in institutional roles like the Ministry of Justice. Even within the profession, there are divisions. It is noted that within legal specialties—family law, corporate law, private law—women often gravitate towards less demanding areas like family law. High-paying or high-stress specialties still see male dominance.

(In-depth interview – Dr Adelakun, Lead City University, Ibadan).

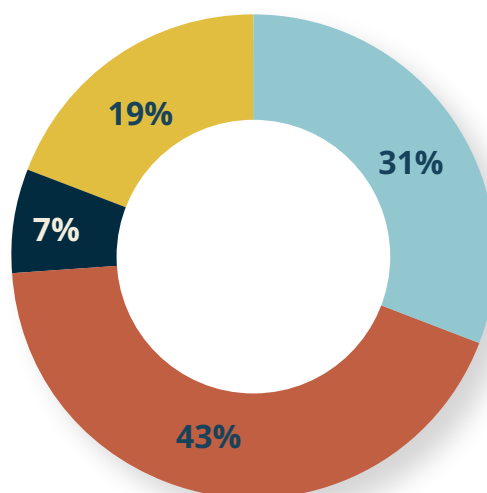


Despite the presence of maternity leave, many workplace policies meant to support women (such as crèches or flexible work hours) are poorly implemented or nonexistent. Meetings are often scheduled late in the evening—intentionally or unintentionally excluding women who have family responsibilities.

(Focus group discussion, Lagos)

FIGURE 6: DISCRIMINATION AND BIAS IN PROMOTIONS LIMIT WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT IN LEGAL LEADERSHIP ROLES

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree



Source: Co-Impact and WARDC online survey on women's leadership in Nigeria's legal sector, 2025.

Figure 6 shows that the majority of the respondents (74.5%) agree that discrimination and bias in promotion limit women's advancement in leadership roles in the legal sector. Sexual harassment and the 'glass ceiling' remain significant barriers to women's advancement in Nigeria's legal profession. According to the International Bar Association's research, one in three female lawyers globally has experienced sexual harassment at work, with Nigeria identified among the countries with the

highest prevalence⁶¹. A 2020 review of the Nigerian Bar Association's Sexual Harassment Policy highlights that such misconduct is often underreported due to fears of retaliation, stigmatisation, and job loss, leading many victims to remain silent.⁶²

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue for female lawyers in Nigeria, contributing to hostile work environments and career setbacks. As noted by Amaka Ezeno, former Chairman of the NBA Awka Branch, sexual harassment and patriarchal structures are among the reasons female lawyers abandon active legal practice.⁶³ The glass ceiling phenomenon is evident in the limited number of women in top-tier positions within law firms and the judiciary. Structural barriers, including opaque promotion criteria and exclusion from influential networks, restrict women's access to leadership roles. These systemic issues not only limit individual career growth but also perpetuate gender disparities within the legal profession.

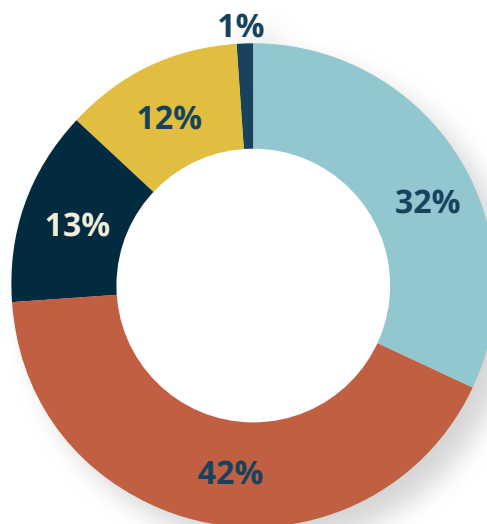


Most often men in the profession believe that women are not capable, so they sideline us. In fact, some law firms do not want to employ women because of their reproductive role. I know how many maternity leaves I took and before I returned, my work and cases had been reassigned to someone else and I had to start from scratch.

(In-depth interview, High Court Judge)

FIGURE 7: THERE IS A LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR IMPLEMENTING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree

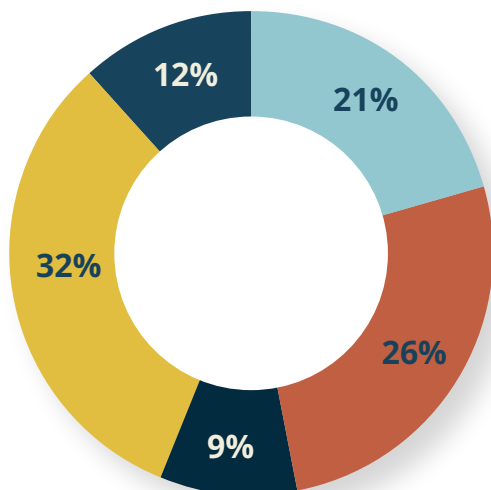


Source: Co-Impact and WARDC online survey on women's leadership in Nigeria's legal sector, 2025.

Figure 7 shows 42.3% of the respondents agree that there is a lack of institutional support for implementing leadership development programmes for women and 31.5% strongly agree. Institutional barriers are also evident in academic legal institutions because of the need to maintain work-family life balance, especially for young female academics, who are often under pressure to fulfil the requirements of career progression and also compete favourably with their male colleagues. Inadequate institutional supports such as flexible working hours, availability of crèches and mentorship often stall the promotion of female academics, while their male counterparts usually rise faster in rank. In many universities, fewer women are found occupying leadership positions in Faculties of Law (see Table 3).

FIGURE 8: THE LEGAL PROFESSION IN NIGERIA PROVIDES EQUAL LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree



Source: Co-Impact and WARDC online survey on women's leadership in Nigeria's legal sector, 2025.

Figure 8 shows that approximately 44% of the respondents either disagree or strongly disagree that the legal profession in Nigeria provides equal leadership opportunities for women.

3.1.4. INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL BARRIERS

Some barriers for women in law in Nigeria are self-imposed, and perpetuated by patriarchal socialisation and orientation. Societal expectations and stereotypes about women's roles can be internalised, causing women to question their suitability for leadership or feel pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. This orientation often creates limitations that exclude women from existing opportunities. Internal barriers can manifest as a lack of belief in their abilities, fear of negative judgments, or reluctance to take on leadership roles due to societal expectations and stereotypes.



Even from religious teachings, women are socialised to be gentle and reserved. While things are slowly changing, these orientations still influence how female lawyers perceive themselves. Many still believe that a woman shouldn't be speaking publicly or holding positions of authority. So, when a woman lawyer commands respect, society resists.

(Focus group discussion, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife)



Today's culture demands a woman be both a full-time housewife and a full-time professional. The expectation to perform both roles perfectly is unrealistic. Unless a woman has a highly supportive partner willing to share responsibilities, it's difficult to balance both. Many women are forced to either delay their careers or start over later in life, often playing catch-up with their younger peers. The solution lies in addressing societal norms and creating supportive structures that allow women to thrive both professionally and personally.

(Focus group discussion, Lagos).

3.2. Enablers of Women's Leadership in Nigeria's Legal Sector

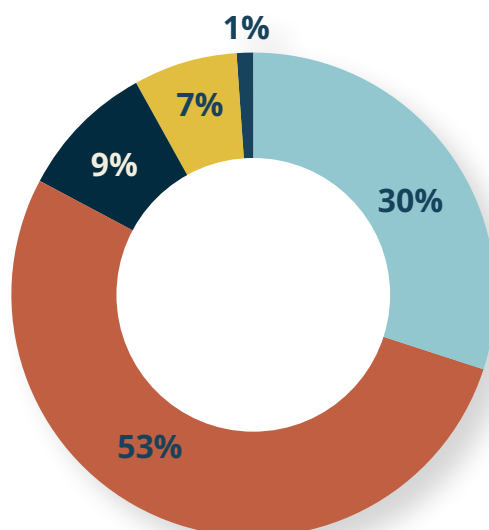
3.2.1. ENABLING LEGAL AND POLICY INTERVENTIONS

Nigeria's commitment to promoting gender equality within its legal sector is reflected through various constitutional provisions, statutory laws, institutional policies, and active participation of non-governmental organisations. For example Section 42 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria remains a critical tool for promoting gender equality in Nigeria. Women in the legal profession as well as other sectors can rely on this constitutional provision to challenge discriminatory laws, policies or practices.⁶⁴ Section 42 guarantees the right to freedom from discrimination and plays a crucial role in advancing gender equality in various sectors, including the legal profession. This section explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sex, religion, ethnic group, or political opinion, ensuring that no Nigerian citizen should face any disability or restriction based solely on these factors.⁶⁵ This means that women in Nigeria, including those in the legal profession, are constitutionally protected from discrimination on the grounds of their sex. The provision directly impacts the legal sector by providing women with a constitutional basis to challenge any form of gender-based discrimination in their careers.

Beyond the constitution, specific statutes like the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act of 2015 (VAPP Act) address gender-based violence, providing legal remedies and protection for victims. The VAPP Act is landmark legislation, offering extensive legal protection to women in Nigeria. Its provisions specifically criminalise violence against women, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and widowhood rites. Furthermore, the Act creates legal remedies for women victims of violence, including the right to seek protection orders and compensation. These sections are crucial in ensuring that women have access to legal mechanisms that safeguard their rights and protect them from violence in various forms. However legislation is nothing without enforcement.

9. THE ENFORCEMENT OF GENDER EQUALITY POLICIES WITHIN LEGAL INSTITUTIONS IS WEAK OR INCONSISTENT

Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree



Source: Co-Impact and WARDC online survey on women's leadership in Nigeria's legal sector, 2025.

Figure 9 shows that 53% of respondents agree and 29.5% strongly agree that the enforcement of gender equality provisions in the existing legal and policy framework is weak or inconsistent.

The Revised National Gender Policy (2022) is anchored within the framework of the Constitution of Nigeria 1999, which guarantees equality and right to freedom from discrimination and various global, regional and national policy commitments to gender equality and human rights (including CEDAW, the Beijing Platform of Action, the SDGs, the African Charter and its Protocols for Gender Equality amongst others). It provides institutional guidelines for achieving a just and gender-equitable society, with women and men both contributing optimally to and benefitting from national development across all sectors. The revised National Gender Policy makes provision for 50/50 representation of women in public appointments. This overwrites the 35% women's representation in the 2006 policy.

“You know we have a national gender policy. I’m just talking from a policy perspective now. The first national gender policy in 2016 had a provision of 35% Affirmative Action in that policy. But even that 35% was not effective. It was not realised. But the revised national gender policy that we have now makes a provision for 50/50% for women participation and representation in leadership positions. 50/50% is a beautiful thing, but also raises a most fundamental question: how would it address what 35% did not? That is the problem.

(Respondent, in-depth interview)

“From international to local laws, there are clear provisions supporting gender equality. Article 2 of international human rights laws mandates non-discrimination based on gender, race, religion and more. Article 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights also mandates equal and favourable working conditions. Article 10 provides social protection for mothers before and after childbirth, including adequate maternity leave. However, implementation is lacking. For instance, in my experience at a private law firm, maternity leave was limited to six weeks, and women were discouraged from taking longer. Some private employers hesitate to hire women due to anticipated maternity-related absences. This discrimination persists despite legal protections.

(Respondent, in-depth interview)



3.2.2. CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM AND ADVOCACY

Women's and feminist movements in Nigeria have been instrumental in advocating for women's rights and supporting legal reforms for women's leadership to thrive. Through innovative media programmes and community initiatives, women's and feminist movements are challenging stereotypes, shifting social norms, and promoting the full participation of women in all aspects of societal life. The push for policy reform and gender-sensitive legislation in Nigeria has had a positive impact and has shaped the way women organise within the country. Women's and feminist movements were the driving

force behind the transformation of the previous Women's Policy into the National Gender Policy in 2006, which has provided the framework for the development of sectoral gender policies across different institutions and agencies such as education, agriculture, environment, police, armed forces and INEC. Women's and feminist advocacy groups were also pivotal in the enactment of the Child's Right Act of 2003 and the VAPP Act of 2005.

The National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS) serves as a coalition of women's organisations, advocating for improved welfare and increased women's political participation and representation. The Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC), established in 2000, focuses on combating human rights abuses against women, addressing gender-based violence, and promoting women's political representation and institutional leadership. Other prominent feminist and women's rights organisations that have been pushing the gender equality agenda forward in Nigeria are the National Association of Women Judges Nigeria (NAWJN), BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights, Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON), Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), and Nigeria Labour Congress Women's Wing.

3.2.3. PROFESSIONAL PLATFORMS AS ENABLERS

The Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) and National Judicial Council play pivotal roles in shaping policies that influence gender equality in Nigeria's legal sector. The NBA has introduced several initiatives aimed at increasing women's

representation in legal practice and leadership positions. Notably, the NBA's Women Forum, established as part of the Association's commitment to gender equality, provides a platform for women lawyers to network, engage in professional development, and advocate for women's rights within the profession. In 2018, the NBA also launched the NBA Gender Equity and Inclusion Policy, which seeks to increase the participation of women in leadership positions both within the NBA and in the broader legal profession. The policy emphasises the need for mentorship programmes for young female lawyers, leadership training, and workshops focused on navigating gender biases. Additionally, the NBA National Women's Conference, held biennially, serves as a key event for discussing gender issues in the legal profession, as well as broader legal and societal issues affecting women.

The National Judicial Council (NJC), on the other hand, has established guidelines for the appointment and promotion of judges that emphasise inclusivity and the importance of ensuring diversity in the judiciary. The NJC's Guidelines on Judicial Appointments provide specific provisions aimed at promoting gender balance by encouraging the nomination and appointment of qualified women judges to high courts and appellate courts.⁶⁶ The National Judicial Policy, revised in 2018, also highlights the importance of diversity in judicial appointments and underscores the NJC's commitment to supporting a gender-sensitive judiciary. Furthermore, the NJC has supported the Women in Judiciary Forum (WIJF), a platform that facilitates networking and capacity-building for female judges and judicial officers.⁶⁷





Existing mentorship programmes, such as those established by the NBA Women Forum and FIDA Nigeria, provide robust support for female lawyers. These initiatives are expanding their reach, including developing programmes that extend to law schools, and speak directly with young lawyers to mentor them on various topics. Academic institutions also play a crucial role as pipelines; many universities host female student-organised programmes like the Law Ladies Day that expose female law students to mentorship programmes and diverse trainings. Furthermore, academic institutions often have informal senior-junior staff mentoring systems.

(Excerpt from the roundtable discussions)

These professional platforms and associations serve as dynamic agents of change, influencing the professional landscape and challenging established norms from various angles. Their combined efforts create significant pressure for institutional reform and provide essential support systems that formal structures often lack. Their presence and effectiveness in the ecosystem demonstrates that progress is driven not only by top-down policy directives but also by bottom-up advocacy and horizontal professional solidarity.

3.2.4 INSTITUTIONAL ENABLERS

Evidence from around the world shows that gender equity and women's leadership in Nigeria's legal sector are strengthened when institutions—not individuals—take responsibility for change. When progress depends mainly on personal effort or the

discretion of individual leaders, gains are uneven and unsustainable. By contrast, institutional approaches embed clear standards, accountability mechanisms, and performance measures that make gender equality a shared, measurable priority across institutions.

Key institutional enablers include the establishment of equitable and transparent promotion systems, with clear and standardized criteria that reduce reliance on informal networks where gender bias often operates. The introduction of targets or quotas for women in leadership can further accelerate representation and signal institutional commitment. Equally important are formalized leadership pipelines that intentionally identify, mentor, sponsor, and prepare women for leadership roles such as Heads of Department, Deans, and Directors, ensuring that advancement is structured rather than ad hoc.

Institutions can also create safe and accountable workplace cultures, supported by robust policies to prevent and effectively respond to gender discrimination and sexual harassment, with clear reporting mechanisms and accountability for enforcement. Work-life balance policies—including flexible work arrangements, enhanced parental leave provisions, and access to childcare or other care-support mechanisms—are equally essential to addressing structural barriers that disproportionately affect women's career progression.

Embedding gender perspectives within legal curricula, research priorities, and academic discourse can further strengthen institutional transformation by ensuring that jurisprudence, legal practice, and workplace culture reflect diverse lived realities. Finally, establishing feedback platforms and collective voice mechanisms within institutions can shift women's participation from passive inclusion to meaningful influence by increasing leadership visibility and access to decision-making spaces. The systematic collection and use of gender-disaggregated data can help make disparities visible, enable comparison across institutions, and strengthen accountability, reinforcing gender equity as a core institutional benchmark rather than an aspirational goal for organizations.

4 Recommendations





In addition to understanding the barriers limiting women's career progression in Nigeria's legal sector, a significant part of our study also focused on identifying strategies aimed at improving the institutional, societal, and personal environment for women lawyers to enable them to access, thrive, and attain positions of impact and influence. The following recommendations are intended to address the various barriers identified earlier in this report.

4.1. Strengthening the legal and policy framework

Nigeria currently lacks a robust legal framework that promotes gender equality in leadership. Affirmative action, when embedded in law, can create real opportunities for women to thrive. Without deliberate policies, the playing field remains uneven. The gender equality bill should be ratified without further delay to provide enforcement power for all the existing policies and declarations subscribed to by Nigeria. Rwanda, Mauritius, South Africa and other countries that have made progress on women's leadership all adopted quota representation. Ghana emulates this ambition with a quota representation that is binding. The affirmative action recommended by Nigeria's National Gender Policy is advisory, and hence not binding and enforceable at the court. There is a need therefore to have quota representation such as 60% men, 40% women at the National Assembly and other institutions of governance such as the executive and judiciary.

4.2. Gender-supportive institutional measures

Beyond legal and policy reforms, there is a need for institutional approaches to facilitate the attraction and retention of women to leadership roles. Private and academic law institutions must offer flexible working hours that will accommodate women's responsibilities both in the office and at home. Facilities like crèches should be provided for nursing mothers with young children. Adequate paid maternity leave should be incorporated into working conditions for women without risking termination of appointment while on leave. Formalized, institutionalised mentoring and networking programmes, especially for young lawyers, will facilitate women's career progress. Faculties of law across Nigeria should provide sponsored professional training, scholarships and other incentives to enhance career progression of young female academic staff. Gender-sensitive promotion policies that recognise women's family and career responsibilities, equal remuneration for professional duties and sexual harassment policy at work places are also recommended.⁶⁸



4.3. Networking and collaboration

There is a need to create more formal and informal networking opportunities that are explicitly inclusive and strategically designed to build robust connections among women lawyers across different specialisations, career stages, and geographical locations.

Networking and collaboration provide safe, supportive spaces for women to navigate complex challenges, build resilience, expand professional networks, and gain access to resources and opportunities. Leadership can be isolating—particularly for women who are breaking new ground—but strong networks offer critical emotional support, foster shared learning and collaboration, amplify voices, and open doors that might otherwise remain closed.



There must be deliberate effort to foster collaborations between all institutions within the legal profession in Nigeria, from public to private and the civil society. These partnerships should focus on sharing best practices, pooling resources, and creating integrated support systems for women's leadership development

(quote from roundable)

4.3.1 INTENTIONALITY AND STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT

Targeted leadership development initiatives should be specifically designed for female lawyers, equipping them with critical skills such as public speaking, negotiation, strategic thinking, and confidence-building, while also addressing internalised barriers and societal conditioning that may constrain ambition or advancement.

Their effectiveness is strongest when formal mentorship programmes operate alongside organic, informal networks. Together, they expand access to professional connections, strengthen institutional support, and help counteract systemic disadvantages that limit women's progression into leadership.



I've heard a lot of women don't support women. We must be intentional. We must speak to other women. They come to tell you that this woman says she's not going to support you. You are angry. You are offended. She's not your enemy.... Go and solicit support, go and negotiate; that's leadership. You have to negotiate with the other side. Bring them on board. What do they need? They may not support you because of what they need or what the men have promised them. And sometimes men tell us that women will not support you. It's a lie. Because they have gone behind your back for negotiation on what you have not said. So, you have to be intentional. You have to reach across the other side. If the woman says she doesn't like you, she has a reason. Did you bother to find out why she doesn't like you? She has to see reasons to support you.

(Focus group discussion, Lagos)



There should also be active engagement and education of male leaders and professionals within the legal sector to become vocal and proactive allies and advocates for gender equality, recognising that their support is crucial for systemic change.



It has been advocated that male gatekeepers who often hold positions of power or influence, and can either hinder or facilitate women's advancement, and should be transformed to allies. There are recognised male allies or male champions, who support activities of female lawyers. In 2021, while formulating the NBA Sexual Harassment Policy, the committee set up by the NBA President had male allies. The male allies were very useful in suggesting and incorporating many important provisions, which otherwise would have been ignored. I commend the Institute for African Women in Law for initiating the programme known as Men Advocates in Law for Equity (MALE).

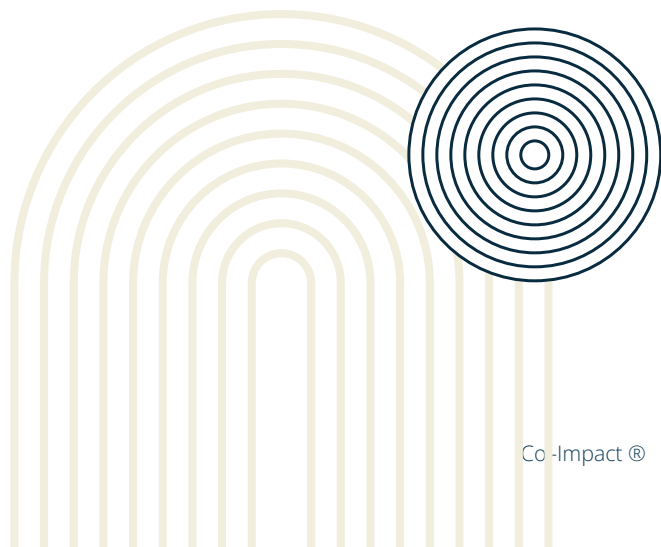
4.4. Strengthening agency through training and mentorship

There is a need to design structured mentorship and training programmes by connecting junior and mid-career female lawyers both in the academic, core and other institutions of law with experienced leaders who are committed to gender equity. Such mentorship programmes should be tailored/ guided to develop leadership skills, promote career advancement and build capacity to navigate through anticipated challenges - both institutional and personal. It is also recommended that there should be a policy at every institution of law - core, academic and supporting - that integrates mentorship and professional training as core institutional development. In addition, there should be adequate funding through appropriate budget allocation to cater for mentoring and training activities.



Within the Rivers State Judiciary, we work like a family. I can even call a junior judge and ask, 'Have you encountered this kind of case?' We support one another. This collegial bond is reinforced by a WhatsApp group for women judges in the state. It's not a formal association, but it's a great support system.

Respondent, KII,



5 Conclusion



This study provides valuable insights into the challenges of women's leadership in the legal profession in Nigeria and underscores the need for greater support and encouragement for women in leadership roles.

The report also highlights the importance of institutional support systems to advance women's leadership position in the legal profession. From the perspectives of various respondents, emphasis should also be placed on creating mentoring networks that build, support and train women for leadership positions in law.

It is our hope that by highlighting the complex barriers, gaps in policy and implementation, lived experiences and professional development needs of women in law, this report will provide helpful baseline data for gender-responsive policy reforms in the legal sector.

While this scoping study provides useful insights, time constraints and its limited scope mean that some important knowledge gaps remain. Addressing these gaps through further targeted research is essential for developing evidence-based interventions and advocacy strategies. For example, additional data is needed on women's representation in leadership ranks within specific types of law firms (e.g. large corporate firms versus smaller practices), corporate legal departments across different industries, and various government agencies beyond the judiciary and legislature. This data would allow for a precise identification of barriers and challenges in specific sub-sectors, and tailoring of interventions. In addition, while intersectionality in general provided a framework for the study, there is a need to examine more deeply how the specific challenges of variables such as ethnicity, regionality, religion, socioeconomic status and disability affect women leadership in the legal sector. Furthermore, though the study identifies some current, promising initiatives promoting women's visibility and leadership in the legal sector, further study is needed to

evaluate the effectiveness of those initiatives and their impact. Finally, evidence from the field study largely supports enlisting 'male champions' to promote women's leadership in law. However, there is need for additional study to explore the effective strategies for engaging men as partners, especially in challenging deep-seated cultural norms within specific legal institutions.



Co-Impact and WARDC Stakeholder Validation Roundtable on Women's Leadership in Nigeria's Legal Sector, Abuja, August 2025

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