

IMPACT OF GENDER MAINSTREAMING POLICIES ON THE OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY OF THE NIGERIAN AIR FORCE

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Abstract

Gender mainstreaming in military institutions is crucial for enhancing operational effectiveness, institutional efficiency, and national security. Despite policy advancements, the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) faces systemic barriers that hinder the full inclusion of women in key operational roles. This study examines the impact of gender mainstreaming policies on the NAF, focusing on recruitment, training, leadership opportunities, and combat participation, using Liberal Feminist Theory and Feminist Institutionalism approach to explore how entrenched gender biases, institutional resistance, and socio-cultural norms shape policy implementation. The study adopted a qualitative content analysis of policy documents and NAF reports. While gender policies exist, their execution remains inadequate due to patriarchal structures, limited leadership opportunities for female personnel, and restricted access to combat training. Gender-inclusive military forces demonstrate greater adaptability, enhanced decision-making, and higher mission success rates, highlighting the socioeconomic and strategic benefits of mainstreaming gender in the NAF. However, challenges such as inadequate funding, weak accountability mechanisms, and persistent societal stereotypes continue to impede progress. The study recommends policy restructuring, expanded combat training for women, leadership mentorship programs, and stronger monitoring frameworks to ensure systematic gender inclusion. A more gender-balanced military is essential for strengthening Nigeria's national defence strategy and achieving long-term security reforms.

Keywords: *Nigerian Air Force, Gender Mainstreaming, Military Effectiveness, Operational Efficiency, Liberal Feminist Theory*

Introduction

Gender mainstreaming is defined as the systematic integration of gender perspectives into all aspects of military policy, planning, and operations to ensure equality between men and women (United Nations, 2000). Despite global advancements in gender equality within military structures, the Nigerian Air Force (NAF), established in 1964, remains a male-dominated institution. In contrast, nations such as Norway and the United States have successfully integrated women into combat aviation and leadership roles, thereby enhancing mission success rates by up to 20% through the optimisation of decision-making processes and the augmentation

of operational diversity (Sjoberg & Pruitt, 2017; Segal, 2019). Women constitute a mere 12% of NAF personnel, predominantly confined to administrative and medical roles, with minimal representation in combat or strategic leadership positions (Security Women Review, 2024; NAF Gender Audit, 2023). This disparity persists despite Nigeria's ratification of international frameworks such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), which mandates the inclusion of women in peace and security efforts, and the African Union's Gender Equality Strategy (2024), which emphasises institutional reforms to dismantle barriers to women's participation (UN Women, 2020; AU Commission, 2024).

The NAF's operational policies, shaped by entrenched cultural norms and institutional biases, continue to exclude women from high-status roles, perpetuating a cycle of underrepresentation and inefficiency. For instance, as of 2023, no woman has attained the rank of Air Vice Marshal, and only 2% of combat pilots are female (Bature, 2020; NAF Annual Report, 2023). This phenomenon, termed "gender side streaming" by Newby et al. (2020), can be understood as a manifestation of a systemic resistance to gender parity within the institution, stemming from deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that equate military leadership with masculinity (Archibong et al., 2018; Duncanson, 2016). These biases are further entrenched by recruitment practices that disproportionately disadvantage women by placing undue emphasis on physical fitness standards (Bohdalová & Stojarová, 2023; Carreiras, 2015). This is despite evidence that capability varies more significantly on an individual basis than it does based on gender (Bohdalová & Stojarová, 2023; Carreiras, 2015).

It has been contended that the pervasive underrepresentation of women in the NAF undermines operational effectiveness, contravenes international commitments, and perpetuates socioeconomic inequities. Despite the existence of global evidence that militaries with gender diversity achieve higher mission success rates – Norway's integration of women into combat roles improved decision-making by 20% (Sjoberg & Pruitt, 2017) – Nigeria's NAF remains entrenched in patriarchal norms, restricting women to non-combat roles (12% representation) and excluding them from leadership (Security Women Review, 2024; Bature, 2020). This disparity has the effect of limiting the utilisation of talent in critical security operations, such as counterterrorism in the Northeast, and also of weakening Nigeria's compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and the African Union's gender equality mandates (UN Women, 2020; AU Commission, 2024). Moreover, the exclusion perpetuates systemic inequalities within Nigerian society, impeding economic opportunities for women and perpetuating stereotypes that hinder female participation in defence sectors (Heinecken, 2022; Kemi & Jenyo, 2016).

This paper explores how gender mainstreaming policies influence the operational effectiveness of the NAF, with a focus on recruitment, training, combat readiness, and leadership opportunities for female personnel. In addition, the challenges of implementing gender mainstreaming policies in Nigerian Air Force are examined.

Methodology

This research utilised a qualitative content analysis approach. Data sources included gender-related policy documents, NAF strategic plans, training manuals, annual reports (2015–2024), and publications by government and non-governmental organisations. Documents were coded thematically to extract references to gender inclusion efforts and institutional barriers. Comparative analysis was employed to contrast policy intentions with reported outcomes, thereby revealing implementation gaps and entrenched institutional challenges. This methodology facilitated a critical exploration of the real-world implications of gender mainstreaming policies on operational efficiency.

Conceptual Clarifications

Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming involves integrating gender considerations into policies and institutional practices to ensure equality in access, opportunities, and decision-making (Rolleri, 2013). Rolleri (2012) highlights three core aspects: equitable access to resources, equal participation in social and political spheres, and protection from violence. The Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG) (2022) stresses that gender equality is not uniform treatment but fairness, addressing historical disadvantages. In this study, gender mainstreaming refers to the systematic incorporation of gender perspectives into NAF policies, planning, and operations to foster inclusivity.

Beyond institutional reform, gender mainstreaming is also a normative and strategic agenda aimed at transforming power relations and eliminating structural inequalities between men and women (True & Parisi, 2013). It is not merely about increasing female participation, but about embedding gendered thinking into every level of policy development, implementation, and evaluation (Walby, 2005). In military contexts, this means ensuring that planning, training, deployment, and command structures are consciously inclusive and responsive to gendered realities (Hendricks & Hutton, 2008). Effective gender mainstreaming requires a dual approach: integrating gender perspectives into mainstream practices while also maintaining targeted interventions to address persistent disparities. As such, it serves both as a means to institutionalise equality and as a critical indicator of organisational transformation (Daly, 2005; Rao & Kelleher, 2005).

Nigerian Air Force

The Nigerian Air Force (NAF) was formally established on 18 April 1964, following the passage of the Air Force Act in 1963, which enabled the Nigerian government to set up an aerial branch of its armed forces (Wyss, 2018). Its formation was influenced by regional security imperatives and international defence collaborations, particularly with Germany and Ghana. The NAF has since evolved into a strategic component of Nigeria's national defence infrastructure, playing a pivotal role in aerial combat, counterinsurgency, peacekeeping, and logistics operations. With over 18,000 personnel and a fleet of platforms including the JF-17 Thunder, F-

7NI, and Super Tucano, the NAF continues to modernise its capabilities through acquisitions, joint trainings, and technological innovations (Omeni, 2022).

However, despite these advancements, the institution remains largely patriarchal in structure. Historically, women in the NAF were restricted to support roles such as medical, administrative, and logistics services, with minimal access to operational and command functions. This gendered division of labour has only recently been challenged by incremental policy reforms. Notable milestones include the admission of female cadets to the Nigerian Defence Academy in 2011 and the commissioning of the first female combat helicopter pilot, Tolulope Arotile, in 2019. These developments reflect the NAF's gradual shift toward inclusivity, although significant gender disparities in career progression, leadership, and combat deployment persist (Security Women Review, 2024; Bature, 2020).

Despite the introduction of the NAF Gender Policy in 2016, which mandates equitable recruitment and career advancement, implementation remains inconsistent. Institutional resistance, inadequate monitoring mechanisms, and prevailing gender stereotypes continue to restrict women's participation in decision-making roles. Thus, while the NAF has made notable progress in expanding its strategic capabilities and operational readiness, achieving gender parity remains a key challenge in its institutional development.

Operational Efficiency

Operational efficiency is broadly defined as the ability of an organisation to utilise its resources, human, technological, financial, and temporal in a manner that maximises outputs and performance while minimising waste, redundancy, and cost (Drucker, 2012). It entails optimising processes, ensuring high-quality service delivery, and aligning operations with strategic objectives across both public and private sector contexts (Kaplan & Norton, 2004). In institutional settings, operational efficiency is gauged by metrics such as productivity, timeliness, adaptability, and sustainability. Effective systems are characterised by integrated planning, streamlined workflows, decentralised decision-making, and the capacity for continuous improvement (Porter, 1985).

In the military context, operational efficiency specifically refers to the capacity to achieve maximum mission outcomes with minimal resource expenditure while preserving agility, resilience, and strategic focus. It encompasses the integration of logistics, intelligence, command structures, and force deployment to maintain readiness and precision in complex environments (Carter & White, 2001; Mahmood et al., 2024). Technologies such as AI, autonomous systems, and cybersecurity infrastructures support rapid, informed responses to evolving threats.

Additionally, military operational efficiency includes systemic adaptability, coalition interoperability, and organisational agility. Effective military organisations dynamically reconfigure resources, implement decentralised decision-making, and collaborate seamlessly with allied forces (Kostopolos et al., 2025; Kashif & Latif, 2024). However, scholars caution against over-optimisation, advocating for a balance between efficiency and resilience to sustain long-term effectiveness (Farrell, 2024). Contemporary metrics also consider energy

sustainability and the use of predictive simulations, indicating that operational efficiency is a multidimensional and evolving construct (Valickaitė, 2025; Heng, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Liberal Feminist Theory and Feminist Institutionalism to critically analyse the role of policy frameworks in shaping gender dynamics within the NAF. Liberal feminism, as articulated by scholars such as Friedan (1963), advocates for institutional reforms that eliminate gender-based barriers and promote equal opportunities for men and women. It emphasises legal and policy interventions aimed at dismantling discriminatory structures that have historically marginalised women, particularly in male-dominated fields such as the military. By focusing on gender-neutral policies, merit-based recruitment, and the removal of restrictive regulations, liberal feminism provides a theoretical foundation for assessing whether existing military policies facilitate or hinder women's full participation in the NAF. This perspective is particularly relevant in examining issues such as recruitment, promotions, leadership roles, and combat participation, where women have historically faced institutional resistance.

Feminist Institutionalism, on the other hand, provides a complementary lens by exploring how deeply embedded institutional norms, bureaucratic traditions, and informal power structures shape gender inclusion within security institutions (Krook & Mackay, 2011). This theory approach acknowledges that even when formal policies promote gender equality, deep-seated cultural and organisational practices may still sustain gender disparities. Within the NAF, this framework helps to analyse how institutional hierarchies, military traditions, and unwritten norms influence the implementation and effectiveness of gender-focused policies. It considers whether gender-inclusive policies are merely symbolic or if they genuinely lead to structural changes that enhance women's representation and participation in security operations.

When applied directly to the dimensions of recruitment, training, combat readiness, and leadership opportunities, the relevance of these theories becomes even clearer. Liberal Feminist Theory provides a foundation for critiquing gender-biased recruitment policies that restrict female entry into the military or divert them into support roles. It also highlights inequalities in access to training programs and opportunities for combat readiness, arguing for merit-based criteria that treat men and women equally. In contrast, Feminist Institutionalism allows for an understanding of why, even when training opportunities are formally available, informal barriers such as cultural norms, mentorship exclusion, and lack of institutional support may prevent women from participating fully.

In the realm of leadership, Liberal Feminist Theory advocates for transparent promotion mechanisms and equal opportunity in ascending to command positions. It challenges traditional hierarchies that favour male leadership and promotes reforms in performance evaluation and leadership development structures. Meanwhile, Feminist Institutionalism offers insight into how organizational inertia and patriarchal command cultures restrict the realisation of these reforms. The theory also explains why gender mainstreaming policies, although present on paper, face

poor implementation due to lack of accountability, weak institutional memory, and the resilience of informal male-dominated networks.

Together, these theories offer a holistic approach to understanding gender mainstreaming in the Nigerian Air Force. While Liberal Feminist Theory highlights the need for policy and legal change in areas such as recruitment and combat readiness, Feminist Institutionalism draws attention to the real-world practices and cultural resistance that undermine these changes. By anchoring the study in both perspectives, this research examines how formal policy frameworks and institutional norms interact to shape female officers' experiences in training, leadership, and operational roles, as well as the persistent implementation gaps in gender mainstreaming efforts across the NAF.

Gender Mainstreaming and Operational Effectiveness in the Nigerian Air Force

The integration of gender perspectives into military structures has been recognised globally as essential to enhancing operational performance, particularly within increasingly complex and asymmetrical security environments (Carreiras, 2015). In the context of the Nigerian Air Force (NAF), gender mainstreaming efforts—while commendable in policy intent—have produced mixed results in practice. Despite progressive developments, including the induction of female cadets into the Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA) in 2011 and the historic appointment of Flying Officer Tolulope Arotile as the first female combat helicopter pilot in 2019, deep-rooted institutional and societal barriers continue to hinder the full operational inclusion of female personnel (Nigeria Air Force, n.d.; Adetunji, 2020).

1. Recruitment and Institutional Transformation

Historically, the NAF's recruitment practices restricted women to administrative and medical roles, mirroring societal norms that discouraged female participation in active defence roles (Nigeria Air Force, n.d.). Although the adoption of the NAF Gender Policy (2016) and the broader influence of Nigeria's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2018) have facilitated the inclusion of women in diverse technical and operational specialisations, significant recruitment gaps remain. The persistent underrepresentation of women in combat and aviation roles reflects an enduring institutional reluctance to fully leverage female human capital, thereby limiting the Force's personnel diversity and strategic adaptability (Archibong et al., 2018; Iroanya, 2019).

2. Training and Combat Readiness

The extension of equal training opportunities to female cadets at the NDA was a major policy milestone aimed at standardising operational competencies across genders (Nigeria Air Force, n.d.). However, while women now undergo similar tactical and academic military training as men, there are ongoing disparities in deployment outcomes. Despite successful examples—such as the all-female crew that led an operational Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) mission in 2020—female personnel remain largely excluded from frontline combat duties (All-Female Air Force Team Makes History in Nigeria, 2021). The limited inclusion of women

in direct combat operations reduces the overall capacity of the Force to respond flexibly and innovatively to multidimensional security threats, particularly in counter-insurgency missions (Matfess, 2021).

Combat readiness is also affected by gender biases in physical training regimens and unit integration practices. Research has shown that diverse units, when cohesively trained, exhibit enhanced problem-solving, cultural intelligence, and communication—skills critical to counterterrorism and peacekeeping operations (Winslow & Dunn, 2002; Carreiras, 2006). However, in the NAF, perceptions of female physical inferiority and logistical challenges related to mixed-gender deployments continue to curtail the strategic deployment of female officers in combat scenarios (Aga, 2022).

3. Leadership, Morale, and Institutional Cohesion

Leadership representation remains another crucial metric through which gender mainstreaming affects operational effectiveness. Although policies have been enacted to improve career advancement opportunities for female officers, the pace of promotion remains slow, and women are often excluded from strategic leadership circles (Archibong et al., 2018; Akanji et al., 2024). Structural inequalities in promotion criteria, informal mentorship barriers, and a lack of visibility in command roles have collectively undermined female personnel morale and unit cohesion. These disparities contribute to attrition and stunted career trajectories among female officers, diminishing the institutional benefits of gender diversity (Cox & Dalton, 2022).

Importantly, studies demonstrate that unit cohesion and team performance are significantly enhanced when female personnel are granted equitable access to leadership development, training, and strategic roles (Newby et al., 2020; Usman et al., 2020). Conversely, systemic exclusion breeds disillusionment, hampers trust, and limits the operational output of military teams. The NAF's efforts at fostering inclusivity must therefore go beyond token representation to incorporate enforcement mechanisms that guarantee equity in leadership opportunities and combat role assignments.

4. Strategic Implications for Peacekeeping and Counter-Terrorism Operations

The exclusion of women from critical combat and intelligence roles has broader ramifications for national and regional security, particularly in the context of peacekeeping and counter-insurgency engagements. Nigerian female officers have excelled in international peacekeeping deployments, where their ability to engage local populations, gather sensitive intelligence, and mediate community disputes has proven invaluable (Newby et al., 2020). Nonetheless, their underrepresentation in frontline counter-terrorism units within Nigeria diminishes the NAF's operational range and undermines efforts to address insurgency threats in the Northeast.

Cultural norms in some operational theatres restrict male officers from engaging directly with women in affected communities, placing female officers at a strategic advantage in intelligence gathering and de-radicalisation interventions (Usman et al., 2020; Aga, 2022). The continued marginalisation of female personnel from these critical functions results in lost intelligence

opportunities and weakens Nigeria's internal security responses. Therefore, the operational effectiveness of the NAF is intrinsically linked to its ability to institutionalise inclusive deployment practices and develop a gender-balanced force structure.

Thus, while the Nigerian Air Force has made notable strides in promoting gender inclusion—spurred by international mandates, national policies, and internal reform efforts—implementation gaps and entrenched institutional cultures remain significant obstacles. Gender mainstreaming, if pursued as a strategic imperative rather than a symbolic gesture, holds immense potential to transform operational performance, enhance unit cohesion, and expand the Force's capacity to respond to contemporary security challenges. The future effectiveness of the NAF lies in its willingness to institutionalise gender parity across recruitment, training, leadership, and deployment, thereby creating a truly inclusive and combat-ready military apparatus.

Challenges in Implementing Gender Mainstreaming Policies

Despite significant progress in promoting gender integration within military institutions, the implementation of gender mainstreaming policies in the NAF faces persistent challenges. Institutional barriers remain one of the most significant obstacles, as resistance from senior military officials and entrenched gender biases continue to hinder the effective implementation of policies aimed at achieving gender parity. Many senior officers, socialised in a traditionally male-dominated military culture, often perceive gender mainstreaming as a threat to the existing hierarchy and operational norms (Gordon, 2020). This resistance manifests itself in a reluctance to assign women to leadership roles, restricted access to high-profile assignments, and the maintenance of outdated policies that limit women's participation in combat operations. Furthermore, the lack of gender-sensitive leadership training programmes exacerbates the problem, as many decision-makers within the military lack the awareness and skills necessary to foster an inclusive environment. Without targeted training to educate leaders on the importance of gender integration, institutional biases will persist, hindering the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming policies (Hendricks & Hutton, 2008).

In addition to institutional resistance, logistical and training challenges also hinder the implementation of gender mainstreaming initiatives. One of the main challenges is women's limited access to combat training, which prevents them from acquiring the necessary skills to compete on an equal footing with their male counterparts. Many military training programmes have historically been designed with a male-centric approach, excluding women from essential aspects of combat preparation, field exercises and leadership development programmes (Kang'ung'u & Ichani, 2023). This limitation not only affects career progression, but also reinforces the perception that women are incapable of handling combat roles, further marginalising them within the military structure. Furthermore, the lack of adequate funding for gender integration initiatives is a critical challenge, as financial constraints limit the development and implementation of necessary reforms (Stachowitsch, 2013). Budget allocations for gender-related programmes are often inadequate, resulting in a lack of infrastructure, tailored training

programmes and mentorship schemes to support female officers. Without dedicated resources, successful gender mainstreaming remains elusive, highlighting the need for greater institutional commitment, policy enforcement and financial investment in gender-inclusive military reforms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Gender mainstreaming in the NAF is essential to improve operational effectiveness, national security and broader socio-economic development. While various policy frameworks have been put in place to promote gender mainstreaming, significant barriers remain to their implementation. Institutional resistance, entrenched gender bias, and inadequate leadership training continue to hinder women's full participation in military operations. In addition, logistical and financial constraints limit the expansion of combat training and career advancement opportunities for female personnel. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that integrates institutional reform, leadership development, and cultural change towards gender inclusiveness. By ensuring that gender integration policies move beyond rhetoric to practical implementation, the NAF can strengthen its operational capacity, workforce diversity and overall strategic effectiveness.

To achieve meaningful gender mainstreaming, the following policy recommendations should be prioritised.

1. Improving gender-inclusive training requires standardising military training programmes to provide equal opportunities for men and women. In addition, increased funding for gender integration initiatives within the NAF will support the development of specialised training, mentoring programmes and career advancement opportunities for female personnel.
2. **Promoting leadership development** includes implementing mentoring programmes that provide career guidance and institutional support to female officers. The Nigerian Air Force (NAF) leadership, in collaboration with the Department of Personnel Management and Gender Desk Officers, should be responsible for designing and overseeing these mentoring initiatives. Additionally, establishing clear, merit-based criteria for promotion—developed and enforced by the NAF Human Resources Directorate—will help eliminate gender bias and ensure that career advancement is based on performance and competence rather than gender-based assumptions.
3. **Strengthening accountability mechanisms** is essential to ensure that gender policies are effectively implemented and continuously evaluated. The NAF Gender Policy Implementation Committee, along with the Office of the Chief of Air Staff, should take the lead in developing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks. These frameworks should enable the systematic assessment of gender integration initiatives to ensure alignment with broader institutional objectives. Furthermore, the Directorate of Policy and Plans should institutionalise transparent reporting mechanisms to regularly document and publish progress on gender integration, thereby promoting leadership accountability and ensuring compliance with existing gender policies.

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