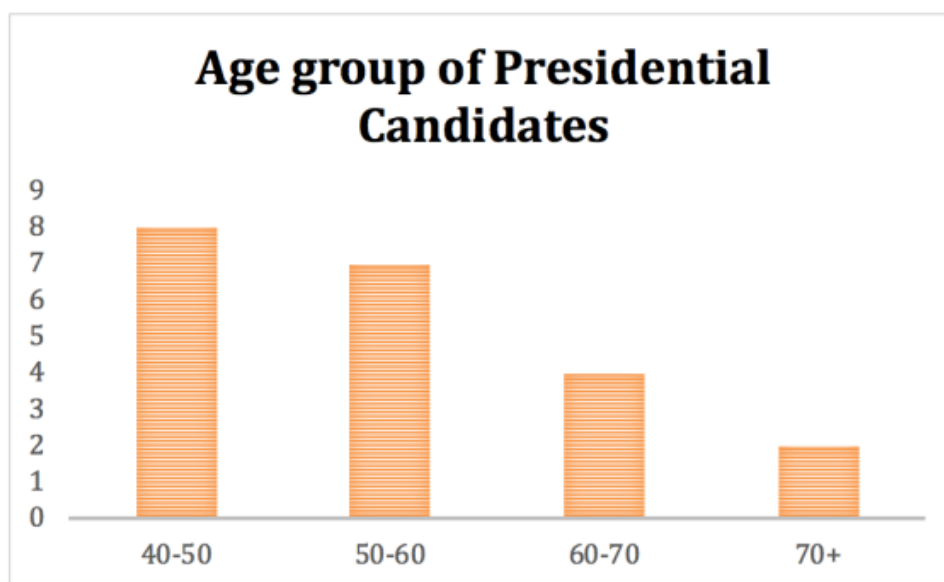


## Nigeria's Presidential elections: are six female candidates better than one?

*2018 is emerging as the “year of the woman”, with record numbers of women being elected in the US mid-terms, and first-time female presidents appointed in Singapore and Vietnam, among others. With the 2019 presidential election looming, Emily van der Merwe examines how Nigeria is faring.*

Nigeria's 2019 presidential election is turning out to be a race of geriatrics, with the two frontrunners, incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari and former Vice-President Atiku Abudakar being the two oldest candidates contesting, at 75 and 71 years respectively. This is not altogether unusual in African countries, where the average age of the 10 oldest African presidents stands at [78](#). (The average age of leaders in the world's ten richest countries is 52.) What is however surprising is that these men lead the youngest populations in the world. With a median age of 18.4 years, there is an age gap of [56.6 years](#) between President Buhari and his average citizen.

However, if a ‘mature’ candidate is elected to lead Nigeria next February, it is not from a lack of younger contenders. Owing perhaps to sustained efforts to get young people interested in politics and the growing appeal of youth movements, this election features a large number of “younger” candidates – under 60 years old, that is.



At the time of writing, this round of elections has also delivered six female candidates, compared to the previous election's one. The 2011 election also had only one female candidate.

2018 is emerging as the “year of the woman”. In the US, record numbers of women have contested the midterm elections and been elected, including the first two Native American women to be elected to Congress in the country's history. The past 14 months has seen waves of female leadership through the Caribbean and Southeast Asia respectively, with Aruba, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Singapore and Vietnam electing their first female prime ministers. 2018 is also the [centenary of women's suffrage in the UK](#), and the year that New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern made history by taking her infant to a UN General Assembly meeting.

How has Africa fared in comparison? Ethiopia's appointment of Sahle-Work Zewde as the country's first female president brings the number of female heads of state to just two (with Namibia). For women in leadership the African experience is very varied, ranging from Ethiopia's 50 per cent female cabinet and Rwanda's [61 per cent](#) of female legislators, to Nigeria's 5.6 per cent female representation in parliament – the lowest ranking African country included in the UN's [Women in Politics](#) map. Nigeria also ranks fifth lowest among 30 Sub-Saharan African countries in terms of gender parity.

According to Professor [Oluremi Sonaiya](#), who was the only woman running for Nigeria's top office in 2015, women have been deterred from politics by a "fear of violence that is always associated with politicking and campaigning during elections". Another reason, she notes, is a lack of funds. "Many women do not have the kind of money that Nigeria's politics require."



Oby Ezekwesili is one of six candidates running for President in the upcoming Nigeria elections  
Image Credit: [Daily Post Nigeria](#)

The kind of money that Nigeria's politics requires turns out to be quite a sum. In the last election, the two top contenders, Buhari and Goodluck Jonathan, reportedly spent over [11.5 billion Naira](#) (over US\$300 million) on their election campaigns collectively. Both spent well above the N1 billion stipulated by the Electoral Act.

Despite the surge in female candidates, there has been [concerns](#) that the current election cycle could obstruct efforts towards greater representation of women in Nigerian politics. This relates to a bill aimed at eradicating gender inequality in politics, education and employment, which has been hotly contested since its introduction in 2010.

If passed, the bill will mandate 35 per cent female representation in Nigeria's cabinet; it will also enforce women's land rights, and uphold the minimum legal age for marriage at 18, in a country where [44 per cent of girls](#) are married before the age of 18. Now, with the election nearing, Nigerian senators are becoming ever wearier of supporting a "controversial" bill against popular vote, as this could threaten their re-election in February.

Gender equality is a controversial and much disputed issue in Nigeria: religious leaders, such as the Sultan of Sokoto, the country's most senior cleric, has condemned the bill on religious and cultural grounds, while [CNN](#) recently reported that a number of Nigerian celebrities, and even one of the women running for president in 2019, "reject feminism".

However, there is no doubt that the six women running for president next year is good news, as it shows rising participation of women in politics, in spite of religious and cultural objections. As presidential candidate and co-founder of the "Bring Back Our Girls" campaign, Oby Ezekwesili states, "How can a country gifted with millions of young, vibrant, brilliant people, be satisfied with just being [an] onlooker?"

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