



Challenges to Women's Active Political Participation in Northern Nigeria: The Interplay of Education, Religious-Cultural Norms, and Financial Barriers

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ABSTRACT

Research Problem: Women's political participation in Northern Nigeria faces multilayered barriers rooted in the interaction between limited educational access, religious-cultural norms, and economic restrictions. Despite constitutional guarantees of gender equality, structural inequalities persist, undermining women's agency in public life. Deeply entrenched patriarchal systems and practices such as the *Kulle* system continue to restrict women's visibility and participation in political processes. These challenges raise fundamental concerns about gender inclusion in Nigeria's democratic governance and the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality).

Research Purposes: This study seeks to analyze the underlying factors that hinder women's active political engagement in Northern Nigeria, with a focus on the intersecting roles of education, religious-cultural traditions, and economic constraints. Grounded in liberal feminist theory and equity theory, the research aims to explain how systemic inequalities—manifested through social norms, limited access to quality education, and economic marginalization—constrain women's opportunities for political participation and leadership.

Research Methods: The study employs a qualitative and analytical approach, utilizing thematic content analysis of secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and institutional documents. Sources are selected to capture the lived experiences of Northern Nigerian women across educational, cultural, and economic dimensions. The method emphasizes interpretive analysis to identify recurring themes, causal relationships, and structural mechanisms that perpetuate women's exclusion from political life.

Results and Discussion: Findings reveal that educational disparities significantly limit women's civic literacy, confidence, and leadership capacity, making it difficult for them to navigate political spaces. Religious and cultural traditions, particularly those emphasizing female seclusion such as *Kulle*, restrict women's mobility and visibility in public affairs. Economic constraints, including high campaign costs, privatized party financing, and inadequate institutional support, further marginalize women aspiring to leadership roles. These dimensions are interlinked, collectively reinforcing systemic exclusion and limiting women's empowerment. The analysis underscores that without addressing the root causes—educational inequality, patriarchal cultural values, and economic disenfranchisement—efforts to promote women's political representation will remain superficial and unsustainable.

Research Implications and Contributions: This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender-sensitive governance by demonstrating how intersecting social, cultural, and economic factors create cumulative disadvantages for women in politics. It recommends multi-level interventions such as expanding access to quality education for girls, engaging religious and traditional leaders to foster cultural reorientation, and instituting legal frameworks requiring political parties to subsidize female candidacies. Furthermore, the research advocates for institutional reforms and financial inclusion initiatives to empower women economically and politically. By integrating feminist and equity perspectives, the study advances understanding of structural gender inequality in Northern Nigeria and provides practical

insights for policymakers, civil society organizations, and scholars committed to achieving gender equality in political participation.

Keywords: Women in Politics, Political Participation, Education, Religious-Cultural Norms, Financial Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

In a world where power is frequently associated with masculinity, women's ascent to political leadership remains a defiant act of courage in the face of centuries of structural exclusion and suppressed ambition. Globally, women in politics face entrenched barriers such as patriarchal norms, gender-based violence, biased media coverage, unequal care giving responsibilities, and intersecting discrimination (Abbas, 2024). In Africa, these problems are exacerbated by restrictive cultural practices, lax enforcement of rights, and unequal access to education and healthcare (Bazaanah & Ngcobo, 2024). In Nigeria, these dynamics are even more pronounced, with political exclusion exacerbated by party structures, societal expectations, limited funding, and insecurity, including targeted violence, all of which prevent women from fully participating in leadership (Kerry, 2024).

Women's equal participation in political life is fundamental to achieving genuine democracy, inclusive governance, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 (Gender Equality) (Ernst, et al., 2024; United Nations, 2015). While Nigerian women have made incremental strides nationally, evidenced by a record number elected to the National Assembly in 2019, stark regional disparities persist (Oweibia et al., 2024). Northern Nigeria presents a particularly challenging environment for women's political engagement due to a confluence of sociocultural, religious, and economic factors (Okunnu, 2024).

Therefore, this region is characterized by a strong patriarchal culture where traditional and religious norms often confine women to the private sphere, marginalizing them from public decision-making (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2022; Nwankwo, 2025). Practices like the Islamic Kulle system (house seclusion) explicitly limit women's mobility and participation in electoral activities (Alidou, 2024). Furthermore, women face significant economic hurdles, lacking the financial resources required for successful political campaigns in Nigeria's "cash-and-carry" democracy (Olayinka, 2021; Wuya, 2021). Educational disparities also disadvantage women, limiting their political knowledge, confidence, and perceived eligibility for leadership (Bush et al., 2022).

The Northern Nigerian Specificity The literature emphasizes that these barriers are particularly acute in Northern Nigeria due to the region's distinct socio-religious fabric (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2022; Imam, 2019). Studies highlight the resilience and strategic navigation of women within these constraints (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2022), but underscore that systemic change requires addressing the foundational issues of education, cultural/religious norms, and economic power (Ushe, 2019; Olayinka, 2021). This study builds directly on this call for a focused investigation into these three dimensions.

Hence these barriers manifest in pervasive gender stereotypes, violence, intimidation, lack of party support, and ultimately, severe under representation of Northern women in elected and appointed offices (Singh, 2024). Erroneously, it is widely assumed that women involved in politics reflect shady sexual objectification, that their personal lives shape arguments about their political potential, and that there is a deep and ongoing denigration of women as sex objects and weak entities (Gothreau et al., 2023) which limits women's political participation. While existing literature acknowledges these challenges broadly, there remains a gap in holistically examining the interplay and relative impact of the core dimensions of education, religious-cultural norms, and financial empowerment specifically within the Northern Nigerian context.

This study aims to bridge the existing knowledge gap by investigating the challenges to women's active political participation in Northern Nigeria through the interrelated dimensions of education, religious-cultural norms, and economic empowerment. Specifically, it seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how these factors interact to constrain women's political agency and to identify leverage points for effective policy intervention. The research objectives are threefold: first, to examine how the level and quality of education influence women's active participation in politics in Northern Nigeria; second, to investigate the effects of prevailing religious and cultural norms on women's engagement and representation in political processes; and third, to assess the extent to which financial empowerment affects women's ability to participate actively and competitively in the political landscape of Northern Nigeria.

This study employs a qualitative and analytical approach to examine the barriers to women's active political engagement in Northern Nigeria, focusing on the intersection of education, religious-cultural norms, and financial empowerment. The primary aim is to develop a conceptual understanding of the structural and institutional obstacles that limit women's participation in the region's political sphere by integrating diverse and up-to-date scholarly and policy materials. Utilizing secondary data from peer-reviewed journals, academic books, policy reports, and credible publications from national and international organizations, the research ensures a comprehensive and contextually grounded analysis. The collected data are analyzed using thematic content analysis, which systematically codes and categorizes recurring patterns and central themes to uncover the underlying factors that perpetuate women's political exclusion—such as limited access to quality education, patriarchal religious interpretations, and economic disempowerment. Through this analytical process, the study provides a deep understanding of how these interrelated factors collectively constrain gender inclusion in political processes, forming a solid foundation for evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at enhancing women's political empowerment and promoting gender-responsive governance in Northern Nigeria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Concept of Political Participation

Political engagement can take several forms, including voting and lobbying, as well as running for office and contesting elections. Although voting is the most popular method of engagement for Nigerian women, female representation in higher levels of political leadership is restricted (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). Efforts to quantify political involvement frequently focus on the number of women in legislative bodies, in which Nigeria routinely ranks among the lowest internationally.

In recent decades, nations like Rwanda have achieved near gender parity in parliament, indicating an improvement in women's political representation worldwide. However, Nigeria falls far behind, with women accounting for fewer than 10% of national parliament seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). Nigeria lags behind other African countries that have enacted affirmative action measures to increase female representation (Mustapha, 2009). Nigeria's slow progress in achieving gender parity in parliament highlights the need for more proactive measures to address barriers faced by women in politics.

Political engagement includes measures taken to influence the distribution of society's resources and values (Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022). Individuals participate in this process by voting for representatives who develop policies governing taxation, social programs, and other public issues. They may also join organizations that aim to actively influence policy choices or promote their opinions, preferences, and requirements in public (Le & Nguyen, 2021). Such efforts may support or oppose government institutions, officials, and policies. Although voting remains the most popular form of political participation, there are various additional options that require varying amounts of time, expertise, and resources.

Concept of Women Political Participation

Women's political participation refers to their active involvement in political processes such as decision-making, policy creation, governance, and leadership at all levels of society. It includes voting in elections, vying for office, serving in political posts, participating in political discussions, joining political parties, and influencing public policy. This notion is based on democratic values that promote inclusive governance and equal participation of all society groups, including women, in politics (UN Women, 2023). Women's political participation is essential for achieving gender equality and ensuring that women's voices are heard in shaping policies that affect their lives.

Women's political participation has historically been limited by patriarchal structures, discriminatory legislation, and cultural traditions that favor males in positions of leadership and decision-making. In many civilizations, including Nigeria, gender norms have historically positioned women as passive participants in public life, restricting their ability to participate actively in politics (Adeniyi, 2022). This exclusion not only weakens democracy, but it also deprives nations of the significant perspectives and contributions that women can bring to national progress and social justice.

The notion of women's political participation is linked to the larger battle for gender equality and women's empowerment. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) both stress the necessity of women's equal involvement in political and public life. Despite these frameworks, worldwide data show that women are still underrepresented in political positions, with just 26.5% of national legislators being female as of 2023 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). This tendency is particularly prominent in sub-Saharan Africa, where cultural, religious, and socioeconomic hurdles impede women's access to political authority.

Women and Political Participation: Interplay of Education

According to Fafunwa, as stated by Comfort (2007), education is the sum number of experiences that a person gains while participating in everyday activities, as well as how those experiences help to make the individual a better person. He also observed that education, whether formal or informal, will assist the average citizen in meeting his basic needs, maintaining good health, learning how to manage his economic affairs, and fulfilling his role as a citizen of his country (Zuwaira, 2020). Going along this line, women's and girls' education will be no different from what has been obtained in the definition of education and the importance attached to education in general, as it is the only effective way to meaningfully contribute to the development of women in all societies.

Education is closely related to women's political engagement. Education is a strong predictor of political engagement. Rita (2015) discusses the direct and indirect implications that formal education has on political engagement. Direct consequences include the development of information and communication skills needed for public discussion, as well as direct instruction in political analysis through courses that cover current events. The indirect benefits include, but are not limited to, giving young people an early apprenticeship in politics, where they may exercise leadership, build civic skills, and learn the bureaucratic and organizational skills required for political involvement.

Despite the significant relevance of education in growing a woman to the point that she can actively engage and contribute to the development of her community, there is still a major issue prohibiting girls from attending school in Nigerian communities (Zuwaira, 2020). Another barrier to women attending school is their own belief that a successful woman's life revolves around her children, spouse, and domestic tasks. This lack of personal desire hinders individuals from considering pursuing alternative educational aspirations, which might have a significant impact on their lives. According to research, education is the most effective tool for emancipating any group of people (Abubakar & Maimuna, 2007). Education not only empowers individuals to make informed decisions and improve their quality of life, but it also contributes to the overall development and progress of a society.

The link between women's education and political engagement is crucial to gender equality and democratic government. Education raises women's understanding of their rights, promotes their self-esteem, and provides them with the tools they need for active political participation. According to Chisamya et al. (2012), educational achievement enables women to challenge established gender norms and aggressively pursue participation in government. As women's education levels rise, they are more likely to vote, join political parties, run for office, and participate in policymaking.

Educational differences in many regions of the world, particularly in poor nations such as Nigeria, severely limit women's political participation. The literacy divide between men and women is frequently reflected in political spheres, where women are underrepresented. According to UNESCO (2023), cultural, economic, and institutional barriers continue to impede girls' education and civic involvement. These restrictions not only limit women's access to school, but they also repress their political aspirations from a young age.

Furthermore, educated women are more prone to question socio-cultural conventions that limit female leadership. According to Uchegbu and Ifemeje (2022), education promotes critical thinking and civic consciousness, allowing women to better negotiate and influence the political scene. Student unions and civic groups in educational institutions also help to train female leaders. As a result, investing in women's education is both a personal empowerment tool and a strategic step toward inclusive and participatory governance.

Religious-Cultural Norms as Impediment of Women Active Political Participation

Women in underdeveloped countries face more barriers to active political involvement than males. Women in government during the cutting-edge period are underrepresented in many countries worldwide (Shehla, Azizullah, & Ihsan, 2019). In a considerable number of these countries, women faced barriers to social investment, notably in pursuing political rights and authority in the legislature and other institutions. Religion has a key role in keeping women at home (Begum et al., 2002). Additionally, cultural norms and traditional gender roles often restrict women's participation in politics and decision-making processes. These barriers hinder the progress towards gender equality and inclusive governance in many societies.

Religious-cultural practices in Northern Nigeria shape societal expectations and gender roles, inhibiting women's active political engagement. The region is largely Islamic and significantly influenced by Hausa-Fulani traditions, which perpetuate patriarchal institutions that limit women's visibility and participation in public life, particularly politics (Imam, 2019). Cultural views based on male supremacy frequently limit women's mobility, education, and leadership opportunities, relegating them to household responsibilities. These constraints are strengthened by interpretations of religious beliefs that prevent women from participating in politics, viewing it as incompatible with traditional modesty or family obligations (Afkhami, 1997). These beliefs are deeply ingrained in society and can be difficult to challenge, further perpetuating the marginalization of women in political spheres.

Furthermore, religious leaders and traditional institutions, which hold enormous power, frequently discourage political involvement among women, either directly or indirectly, by perpetuating the myth that political leadership is the realm of men (Miller, 1968). This has resulted in a sociopolitical atmosphere in which women are either excluded from political processes or lack the necessary support to participate successfully. Furthermore, fear of stigmatization, societal reaction, and allegations of immorality discourage women from running for political office or engaging in party politics (Krook & Sanin, 2020). Even in the absence of explicit legislative impediments, religious and cultural norms effectively exclude women from political spheres.

Financial Barriers and Women Active Political Participation

Women face financial disadvantages as a result of a long history of discrimination and marginalization. Political campaigns are costly and require substantial financial backing to be effective (Nelson, 1984). Over time, the sensual division of labor and sex-based work possibilities have provided males with productive gender roles and a buying power edge over women. This economic disparity favors men at the expense of women. Only a small minority of rich women have the financial resources to fund political campaigns.

Financial barriers are a major impediment to women's active political engagement in Nigeria and many other countries of the world. The political arena, particularly in emerging democracies, is frequently marked by high campaign expenses, privatized election procedures, and political godfatherism, all of which put women at a disadvantage. In Nigeria, the exorbitant cost of running for elective office, including party nomination fees, campaign logistics, media outreach, and supporter mobilization, has systematically excluded many capable women with limited financial resources (Sule, 2025; Okeke-

Ihejirika et al., 2023). This economic disenfranchisement prevents women from participating or being engaged in the political arena, maintaining the gender gap in political representation.

Unlike their male colleagues, women typically have restricted access to financial networks, commercial possibilities, and political favors, all of which are frequently required for political success. Cultural expectations and patriarchal norms typically limit women's economic freedom, hence increasing their financial vulnerability (UN Women, 2022). Furthermore, political parties in Nigeria seldom give significant financial assistance to female candidates, making it difficult for women to gain nominations or effectively campaign. According to research conducted by the International Republican Institute (2020), women candidates frequently describe being marginalized inside party structures due to their perceived inability to fund competitive campaigns, exacerbating the gender gap in political engagement.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored by two complementary theoretical perspectives.

Liberal Feminist Theory

This theory posits that gender inequality stems primarily from unequal access to rights, resources, and opportunities (Giddens, 2006; Samkange, 2015). It advocates for legal and policy reforms to ensure equal rights and remove discriminatory barriers, such as those in education and political participation. It directly informs RQ1 (Education) and RQ3 (Financial Empowerment/Legal Frameworks), emphasizing the need for equal access and opportunity structures. The theory critiques the relegation of women to the private sphere based on cultural and religious constructs of femininity (Freedman, 2001), directly relevant to RQ2 (Religious-Cultural Norms). It frames the challenges in Northern Nigeria as violations of fundamental rights requiring institutional intervention (Samkange, 2015).

Equity Theory

This theory, rooted in Social Exchange Theory, focuses on perceptions of fairness in the distribution of resources and rewards. Individuals compare their input/outcome ratios to others. Perceived inequity (under-reward) leads to distress and motivation to restore balance (Adams, 1965). Applied here, it illuminates how women in Northern Nigeria perceive the significant inputs they make (e.g., as voters, community members) but receive vastly inequitable outcomes (political representation, voice, power) compared to men. This perceived injustice, fueled by barriers like discriminatory norms and lack of resources, contributes to disengagement or the distress motivating activism for change. It provides a lens for understanding the motivational dynamics behind participation/non-participation (relevant to all RQs).

Application of the Theory

The most appropriate theoretical framework for this study is liberal feminist theory. This theory is especially well-suited because it directly addresses the core dimensions investigated in the study: education, religious-cultural norms, and financial empowerment in relation to women's political participation. Liberal feminism is founded on the idea that gender inequality stems from unequal access to legal rights, education, resources, and opportunities. It advocates for institutional reforms that ensure equal treatment and access for women in both the public and private sectors.

In Northern Nigeria, where patriarchal structures, restrictive religious-cultural practices such as the Kulle system, and limited economic opportunities systematically exclude women from political life, liberal feminist theory provides a powerful lens through which to critique these inequalities. It emphasizes the importance of removing discriminatory barriers and promoting gender equity through policy, education, and legal reforms, which are precisely the interventions advocated for in this study.

Furthermore, this theory has been widely applied in gender and political studies in similar sociocultural contexts, providing the study with a strong theoretical foundation. Its reformist orientation makes it particularly relevant for a policy-driven analysis aimed at increasing women's political participation. Liberal feminist theory provides a comprehensive and practical framework for promoting rights, representation, and equal access to power structures.

Structural and Socio-Cultural Determinants of Women's Political Exclusion

Women's political exclusion in Northern Nigeria cannot be understood merely as a product of individual disinterest or incapacity; rather, it is a manifestation of deeply rooted structural and socio-cultural factors that have been historically and institutionally embedded in the region's political and religious systems. These determinants function interdependently—reinforcing each other to maintain a gendered hierarchy that privileges men's participation in politics while marginalizing women's agency. At the structural level, barriers such as unequal access to education, economic disenfranchisement, and systemic discrimination within political institutions continue to undermine women's participation in governance. At the socio-cultural level, patriarchal religious interpretations, traditional practices such as *Kulle*, and gender-biased community norms shape perceptions of women's roles, restricting their presence in public and political spaces. The convergence of these forces constructs a complex web of exclusion that operates both overtly through formal barriers and subtly through cultural expectations and social conditioning.

The structural barriers to women's political engagement in Northern Nigeria are most evident in the educational and economic systems that perpetuate gender inequality. As Fafunwa (in Comfort, 2007) notes, education is the totality of experiences that shape an individual's capacity to function effectively in society. However, the educational landscape in Northern Nigeria remains heavily gendered, with persistent disparities in access, retention, and quality between male and female students. UNESCO (2023) reports that girls in many rural Northern communities face cultural, economic, and institutional obstacles that hinder school attendance and completion. These include poverty, early marriage, parental bias favoring sons, and religiously sanctioned gender norms discouraging female literacy. This educational deprivation translates directly into limited civic literacy, reduced self-efficacy, and minimal exposure to political processes. Rita (2015) emphasizes that formal education cultivates political knowledge, critical thinking, and civic skills—key prerequisites for political participation. Without these, many women in Northern Nigeria remain excluded from understanding, engaging in, or influencing governance.

Furthermore, educational inequality is compounded by the absence of institutional mechanisms to promote women's leadership development. Unlike in other African countries such as Rwanda and South Africa—where affirmative education policies and women's leadership programs have yielded tangible political inclusion—Nigeria's political institutions have largely failed to operationalize gender mainstreaming in civic education (Mustapha, 2009). The absence of state-led initiatives that target female political empowerment sustains a cycle in which low educational attainment perpetuates political passivity. As Chisamya et al. (2012) asserts, education equips women to challenge patriarchal ideologies and advocate for equitable participation. In its absence, traditional hierarchies remain uncontested, and political discourse continues to be dominated by men. Hence, educational marginalization functions as both a symptom and a cause of women's political exclusion, simultaneously disempowering women and legitimizing male dominance in governance structures.

Parallel to educational exclusion, economic disenfranchisement constitutes a second pillar of structural inequality. The Nigerian political system is highly monetized, characterized by exorbitant campaign costs, privatized party financing, and pervasive clientelism (Best, 2008). For women—many of whom are economically dependent or excluded from wealth-generating opportunities—these conditions form insurmountable barriers. Sule (2023) emphasize that the financial burden of running for office in Nigeria effectively disqualifies a large majority of women from participating, as nomination fees, campaign logistics, and patronage networks require substantial resources. Women rarely possess access to these financial networks, which are often controlled by male elites and political godfathers. UN Women (2022) similarly highlights that financial exclusion is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality, as women's limited economic agency restricts their ability to compete in political arenas dominated by capital and patronage.

Moreover, patriarchal norms continue to confine women's economic activities to the informal and domestic sectors, further diminishing their political capital. Cultural expectations position women as dependents rather than economic actors, leading to reduced access to credit, property ownership, and employment—all of which are essential for sustaining political campaigns. Political parties exacerbate this inequity by offering minimal support to female candidates, often perceiving them as “unviable investments” in competitive elections (International Republican Institute, 2020). This structural neglect

is further compounded by the lack of legal mandates requiring gender equity in party nominations and funding allocations. Consequently, women's exclusion is not simply a reflection of economic incapacity but rather an institutionalized outcome of gender-biased political economies.

Socio-cultural determinants, however, operate as the more enduring and pervasive forces that shape the political marginalization of women in Northern Nigeria. The region's dominant religious and cultural traditions—rooted in Islamic principles and Hausa-Fulani customs—define social order in deeply patriarchal terms. Imam (2019) note that these norms prioritize male authority in both the public and private spheres, relegating women to domestic roles and moral guardianship of the home. The *Kulle* system, a traditional practice of female seclusion, epitomizes this socio-religious control by restricting women's mobility and visibility in public life. While originally intended as a symbol of honor and modesty, *Kulle* has evolved into a mechanism of social exclusion, systematically preventing women from engaging in civic and political activities. Afkhami (1997) argue that religious interpretations emphasizing women's modesty and obedience reinforce their dependency and silence in decision-making processes, perpetuating the belief that political participation is incompatible with femininity.

Religious institutions and leaders wield considerable authority in shaping these gender norms. Miller (1968) observe that sermons and religious teachings often promote the notion that leadership is a masculine domain, discouraging women from pursuing public office. This moral framing of gender roles creates a powerful social deterrent against women's political engagement, as those who defy it face stigma, social ostracism, or accusations of immorality (Shiran, 2024). In many communities, the fear of reputational damage or spiritual condemnation is sufficient to dissuade women from political participation, regardless of their competence or ambition. The institutional silence of religious authorities regarding women's civic rights further normalizes exclusion, embedding it within the moral fabric of society.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that religion itself is not inherently exclusionary. As Sen (1999) and Giddens (2006) note, social inequalities arise not from religious doctrine per se but from its selective interpretation and instrumentalization by patriarchal structures. Liberal feminist theory provides a critical lens for this dynamic, asserting that the subordination of women in political life is sustained through unequal access to rights and resources rather than divine injunction (Freedman, 2001; Samkange, 2015). Within Northern Nigeria, this means that religious-cultural norms have been appropriated to legitimize political exclusion, transforming spiritual guidance into a social control mechanism. Thus, challenging these norms requires engagement not only at the political and educational levels but also within religious institutions themselves.

The cumulative effect of these structural and socio-cultural determinants is the institutionalization of women's marginalization in political processes. Political exclusion becomes self-reinforcing: low educational attainment limits women's economic opportunities, economic dependency restricts their political participation, and socio-religious norms validate their subordination. As Powers and Foden (2019) explains, such structural injustices persist because they are embedded within multiple layers of social organization—from family and community structures to political and legal frameworks. In Northern Nigeria, this multilayered exclusion manifests in the consistent underrepresentation of women in elected offices, bureaucratic positions, and policy-making institutions. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), women occupy less than 10% of parliamentary seats in Nigeria, a figure significantly below the African regional average. This disparity underscores the enduring impact of the interlocking systems of gender, culture, and power that sustain women's political marginalization.

Addressing these structural and socio-cultural determinants requires a multidimensional strategy that confronts the ideological, institutional, and economic bases of exclusion. Educational reforms must prioritize gender equity through targeted programs for girls' access and retention, civic education that promotes gender-sensitive leadership, and mentorship initiatives for aspiring female politicians. Economically, the state and political parties should establish financial inclusion policies and dedicated funds to support women's candidacies, as practiced in countries that have achieved higher female representation (Bakhshinyan et al., 2019). Culturally, engagement with religious and traditional leaders is essential to reinterpret gender roles in a manner consistent with Islamic principles of justice and equality. As Kariuki and Reddy (2017) emphasize, effective policy implementation depends on inclusive monitoring and evaluation systems that address both structural and attitudinal barriers.

In sum, women's political exclusion in Northern Nigeria arises from a complex interplay of structural inequalities and socio-cultural constraints. These determinants—ranging from inadequate education and economic disenfranchisement to patriarchal religious norms and institutional neglect—collectively perpetuate a cycle of gendered disempowerment. Breaking this cycle demands an integrative approach that not only reforms political and economic structures but also transforms the cultural and ideological foundations of society. As Stufflebeam (2000) suggests, effective evaluation of social programs must consider the contextual factors that influence outcomes. In this context, dismantling women's political exclusion entails addressing both the external systems of power and the internalized norms that sustain inequality. Only through such holistic transformation can Nigeria move toward genuine gender parity in political representation and fulfill its commitments to democratic inclusivity and social justice.

Policy Implications for Enhancing Women's Political Inclusion

The persistent exclusion of women from political participation in Northern Nigeria underscores the urgent need for comprehensive, multi-level policy interventions that address both structural and cultural barriers. Policy reform in this context must go beyond rhetorical commitments to gender equality and instead establish practical frameworks for the inclusion, empowerment, and protection of women in political life. This approach requires simultaneous engagement across educational, economic, religious, and institutional domains. Effective gender policy in Northern Nigeria should therefore be integrative—combining legal mandates, institutional mechanisms, and socio-cultural transformation to dismantle the entrenched systems of discrimination that limit women's political agency. As Stufflebeam (2003) notes in his CIPP model of evaluation, effective intervention depends on the systematic assessment of context, input, process, and product. Applying this logic to the issue of women's exclusion, policy reform must not only identify gaps in participation but also create adaptive strategies that ensure sustained inclusion and empowerment.

Educational Policy Interventions

Education represents the most foundational lever for expanding women's political inclusion. Policy efforts should focus on increasing access to quality education for girls and young women, particularly in rural and low-income areas where educational disparities are most pronounced. As UNESCO (2023) highlights, the persistence of gender gaps in education is both a symptom and driver of broader inequalities in governance and participation. Therefore, the state must invest in gender-responsive education policies that remove structural barriers such as school fees, inadequate facilities, and teacher shortages in female-dominated regions. Conditional cash transfer programs targeting families that keep girls in school could be scaled up to mitigate the economic pressures that lead to early marriage and school dropouts (Bappenas, 2023). Additionally, integrating civic and political education into the school curriculum can foster early awareness of leadership, governance, and citizenship rights among girls.

Beyond formal education, non-formal and adult literacy programs are critical in empowering women who were previously excluded from schooling. Such programs should incorporate civic learning, political awareness, and leadership training to help adult women navigate local governance and participate in decision-making. This is particularly relevant in Northern Nigeria, where many adult women remain illiterate and dependent on male household members for access to information. Community-based learning centers supported by local governments and NGOs can serve as safe spaces for political education and consciousness-raising. As Chisamya et al. (2012) argues, education is not only a means of personal empowerment but also a process of political socialization that equips women to challenge traditional power structures. Therefore, educational reform is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity for enhancing women's political inclusion.

Economic Empowerment and Financial Inclusion Policies

Economic independence is a precondition for political participation. The highly commercialized nature of Nigerian politics necessitates policy frameworks that support women's access to financial resources. According to Sule (2023), women's limited access to campaign funding and political networks constitutes one of the strongest barriers to their political engagement. Consequently, the Nigerian

government, through agencies such as the Ministry of Women Affairs and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), should establish gender-responsive funding mechanisms that provide financial support and campaign subsidies for female candidates. These could include matching grants, reduced nomination fees, and dedicated quotas for women within political party structures.

Furthermore, the promotion of women's entrepreneurship and access to credit facilities must be prioritized as part of the broader strategy to enhance financial empowerment. Microfinance institutions, cooperative societies, and development banks should be encouraged through policy incentives to offer low-interest loans and grants to women-led enterprises. This approach not only improves women's economic standing but also enhances their visibility and credibility as community leaders capable of representing collective interests. As UN Women (2022) notes, financial empowerment has a multiplier effect on political participation, as economically secure women are more likely to engage in governance and public affairs.

To complement these measures, public-private partnerships could be mobilized to create leadership and business mentorship programs for women. By connecting aspiring female politicians with successful entrepreneurs and leaders, these initiatives can provide both the financial literacy and social capital necessary to navigate Nigeria's competitive political landscape. Political parties also have a crucial role to play in fostering inclusivity by instituting transparent financial processes, gender budgeting, and equitable distribution of campaign resources.

Religious and Cultural Engagement Strategies

Given that religion and cultural norms are deeply intertwined with the social fabric of Northern Nigeria, effective policy design must include meaningful engagement with religious and traditional leaders. Rather than framing religion as an obstacle, policymakers should leverage its moral authority to promote gender equality and women's political rights. As Goetz (2013) and Isufaj (2014) assert, local governance reform in culturally sensitive societies must involve the cooperation of faith-based institutions to ensure legitimacy and acceptance.

Programs that encourage religious scholars to reinterpret sacred texts from a gender-equitable perspective can play a transformative role in reshaping public attitudes. For example, Islamic jurisprudence provides ample room for *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), which can be utilized to affirm women's right to political participation within an Islamic framework. This approach has proven effective in countries like Indonesia and Morocco, where religious leaders have been instrumental in legitimizing women's involvement in politics and public life (Karima et al., 2022). In Northern Nigeria, partnerships between government institutions, women's organizations, and religious councils could foster dialogues that promote inclusive interpretations of faith consistent with justice (*adl*) and equality (*musawab*).

Cultural reorientation should also be pursued through community outreach and media campaigns that challenge stereotypes surrounding women in politics. Radio programs, drama series, and social media advocacy can be used to highlight successful female leaders, emphasizing that women's political participation is compatible with religious and cultural values. The inclusion of male allies—religious leaders, traditional rulers, and influential community figures—in such campaigns is essential for shifting collective attitudes. As Imam (2019) demonstrate, social change in patriarchal contexts requires not confrontation but cooperation between reform-minded actors and traditional authorities.

Institutional and Legal Reforms

To ensure that women's inclusion is not dependent solely on goodwill or temporary initiatives, legal and institutional reforms must codify gender equality as a non-negotiable principle in political processes. The implementation of gender quotas in political representation, similar to those in Rwanda, Senegal, and South Africa, should be prioritized. These quotas can take the form of reserved seats in legislative bodies or mandatory minimum percentages of female candidates on party tickets. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), countries that have adopted legally enforced quotas have experienced a significant increase in women's representation and participation in governance.

Additionally, electoral laws should be amended to reduce the financial burden of contesting elections for women. This includes revising nomination fees, providing public funding for campaigns, and enforcing transparency in party primaries to prevent gender-based exclusion. Legal mechanisms must also protect women from harassment, intimidation, and violence in politics—a pervasive issue that

discourages many from seeking office. The creation of a specialized Gender and Electoral Justice Unit within INEC could serve to monitor compliance, investigate discrimination, and ensure accountability in electoral processes.

Institutional capacity-building within political parties is equally vital. As Kariuki and Reddy (2017) observe, the success of local governance reforms depends on robust monitoring and evaluation systems. Political parties should be required to submit annual gender reports detailing efforts to recruit, train, and promote female members. Civil society organizations and women's advocacy groups should be empowered to hold these institutions accountable through independent audits and public reporting. Such institutionalization of gender monitoring ensures that inclusion is not symbolic but operational.

Integrated Policy Approach and Long-Term Vision

Ultimately, policy interventions must be integrated into a coherent national gender strategy aligned with international commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality). The Nigerian government must view women's political inclusion not merely as a social issue but as a cornerstone of democratic consolidation and national development. As Sen (1999) asserts, development is a process of expanding human freedoms, and without gender equality, no nation can claim true progress.

A long-term vision requires collaboration among key stakeholders—government ministries, academia, civil society, media, and international partners—to create an enabling environment for women's participation. Periodic evaluations using the CIPP model (Stufflebeam, 2000; 2003) should be institutionalized to assess progress, identify challenges, and refine strategies. Importantly, such reforms must prioritize intersectionality, recognizing that rural women, widows, and women with disabilities face compounded forms of exclusion that demand tailored interventions.

In conclusion, enhancing women's political inclusion in Northern Nigeria necessitates a multidimensional policy framework that integrates education, economic empowerment, religious engagement, and institutional reform. Addressing these domains concurrently will yield sustainable outcomes, ensuring that gender equality is not only legislated but lived. Empowering women to participate fully in political life is both a moral imperative and a strategic investment in democratic resilience and social justice. Only through sustained and inclusive policy transformation can Nigeria move toward a governance system that truly represents all its citizens and fulfills the promise of equitable democracy.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that women's political participation in Northern Nigeria remains severely constrained by a combination of structural and socio-cultural barriers, including educational inequality, restrictive religious-cultural norms, and financial disempowerment. These factors are deeply intertwined, creating a system that perpetuates male dominance and systematically excludes women from political life, particularly in rural and conservative communities. Guided by liberal feminist theory, the study underscores the need for comprehensive legislative, institutional, and cultural reforms to dismantle these barriers and foster equitable access to political opportunities. Despite ongoing national and international advocacy for gender inclusion, progress in Northern Nigeria has been slow due to entrenched patriarchal values and persistent economic disparities. The findings not only illuminate the unique challenges within the Northern Nigerian context but also offer a framework for gender-responsive political reform that integrates educational advancement, economic empowerment, and cultural transformation as key pillars for women's political inclusion.

To address these issues effectively, the study recommends that government institutions and non-governmental organizations prioritize girl-child education through targeted scholarships, improved school infrastructure, and community-based advocacy programs designed to shift attitudes toward female education. Religious and traditional leaders should be actively engaged in constructive dialogue to reinterpret cultural and religious norms that limit women's political participation, fostering a more inclusive moral discourse within communities. Political parties must be legally required to provide equitable opportunities for women by subsidizing nomination forms, offering campaign support, and promoting fair representation in leadership structures. Additionally, stronger legal protections are needed

to prevent political violence, harassment, and discrimination against women, ensuring that female politicians can participate without fear or intimidation. Finally, comprehensive training programs in media engagement, leadership development, and public speaking should be provided to enhance women's visibility, confidence, and credibility in the political arena. Through these integrated measures, sustainable progress toward gender equality and inclusive governance in Northern Nigeria can be achieved.

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