

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA'S 2023 ELECTIONS

A Micro-level Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates a micro-level dimension of women's participation in Nigeria's electoral politics. It focuses on a particular local government area: Ikere, in Ekiti state in southwestern Nigeria, during the 2023 general election. The paper uses a qualitative approach to analyse the contributions of women towards the successes of their political parties at the polls, although they have not had full opportunity to contest as candidates. Key informant and in-depth interviews were conducted with respondents who were purposively selected from the leadership of political parties, academia, market and religious institutions, as well as interested onlookers. Additionally, campaign and mobilisation processes were observed during the period of this election. The study concluded that the wait for cultural and socio-economic development to turn in favour of women's numerical increase might not offer any realistic hope. However, the adoption of discretionary affirmative action strategies by party leaders could have a reverse effect and also reinforce prejudice.

Keywords: gender, electoral politics, ethnography, political parties, women's representation

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of history, different groups of people have been incorporated into political structures on the basis of criteria such as gender, ethnicity or social status (Hoodfar & Tajali 2011). Women make up approximately half of the world's total population and have also achieved equal citizenship status with men

in many countries. However, in the political context, women lack full inclusion in the basic leadership processes whether at the grassroots, regional or national levels (Eniola 2018; Okoosi-Simbine & Obi 2020). This underrepresentation is worldwide such that, until recently, major political figures in Africa were presumed to be men. Only with the emergence of scholarship on the politics of gender representation toward the end of the 20th century was the discourse on women's representation addressed by political scientists (Childs & Lovenduski 2013). This field of research gained prominence within political science and other cognate disciplines, at times appearing to be over-researched. Yet, every election cycle continues to provide new insights for the understanding of women's struggle to attain equality in political representation.

The persistent asymmetry of gender representation continues to constitute a serious impediment to human development in Africa (Montgomery 2017, p. 226). Even though some indicators for measuring gender equality are improving, for example the decrease in the prevalence of early marriage and female genital mutilation across Africa (Farouki et al. 2022, pp. 8, 13-16), there is limited progress on the strategic needs and structural issues at the roots of gender inequality, such as unfair social norms and attitudes and a low level of political representation. In most countries, elective offices and gender parity have not enjoyed a strong relationship (Inter-parliamentary Union 2023; Bauer 2019). While some national governments and international bodies have been proactive in their commitment to improving women's representation through different measures of affirmative actions, discrimination along gender line continues to exist. Nowhere is this example more obvious than in Nigeria where women's inclusion occupies a shrinking political space in almost every election cycle (Nwankwor & Adebayo 2021, pp. 559-560; Independent National Electoral Commission 2023, para. 109).

Nigeria has had over two decades of uninterrupted democratic governance since 1999, yet women in Nigeria still grapple with political marginalisation as their voices are hardly ever heard and they seem to have reached a glass ceiling. Their upward political mobility seems, by all account, to be a difficult task. This insignificant descriptive representation of women has been identified as one critical issue which needs to be focused on in order to reverse the socio-cultural and institutional discrimination against them (Mofoluwawo 2014, p. 169). Attention to this situation has encouraged the Nigerian government to introduce enabling policies for women to participate in electoral politics as active participants rather than as onlookers. For example, in 2006 the government introduced a national gender policy to augment gender deficits, including the political representation of women. Also, the country's national conference held in 2014 articulated a robust recommendation to address structural gender inequalities in areas such

as education, commerce, agriculture and politics (Nigerian National Conference Report 2014).

However, an analysis of the trend of political development still reveals that women continue to have a negligible role in politics. According to Ekundayo and Ama (2014, pp. 74-75), the minimal presence of women in some elective offices does not reflect their numerical strength. It also fails to register any achievement in policy advancements on women's issues (Adebayo 2023, pp. 103-104). Interestingly enough, women continue to participate actively in electoral politics and the activities of political parties, but more as mobilisers, support staff and voters (Olutayo & Adebayo 2017, p. 270).

Alliyu's (2016) contribution to the discourse on women in electoral politics and Osori's (2018) experience which was succinctly captured in her book, *Love does not win Elections*, distinguished patriarchal societal structure as an essential framework for analysing gender inequalities across social strata, including politics or any power-structured relationship. The strength of patriarchy which basically allocates resources disproportionately along gender lines, and in favour of men, has continued to have a great impact on women's political prospects. For this reason, throughout history women have had to struggle to be enfranchised, an evolution of their electoral rights which is reflected in the suffragettes' movement.

This study discusses a micro-level dimension of women's participation in Nigeria's electoral politics both through the lens of women mobilisers and women as a mobilised group. It focuses on a particular Local Government Area (LGA): Ikere LGA in Ekiti state, southwest Nigeria, in the 2023 general election. It offers an analysis of the contributions of women towards the electoral successes of their political parties, while they have never really had full opportunities to contest as candidates. The exception is in a few cases when women were arbitrarily imposed by party leadership structures in an attempt to appear gender-sensitive and women-friendly. This affirmative action strategy by party leaders composed almost exclusively of men has been variously criticised as discretionary, ambiguous and sometimes leading to irreconcilable disaffection within the party (key informant interview 2023). Ironically, this attempt at redress has been counterproductive, thereby reinforcing the prejudice it was meant to address.

Ekiti State was created as a federating unit on 1 October 1996 and is the youngest of the six states in the southwest geopolitical zone. The Federal Republic of Nigeria is made up of 36 states (federating units) and a federal capital territory, all of which are grouped into six geopolitical zones (South-West, South-East, South-South, North-Central, North-West and North-East). Geopolitical zones do not constitute formal administrative units; rather, they are clustered for administrative and resource allocation convenience such that no part of the country would feel left out or marginalised. Remarkably, in Ekiti state, the level of women's political

representation has been progressing, especially since the beginning of the last decade. This, to many political observers, is connected to the enterprising attributes of one notable figure, Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, a feminist activist and twice first lady of the state. Passionate about women's development and political inclusion, her activities in this regard can be traced to her time as the Director of Akina Mama wa Afrika, an international development organisation for African women, among many other feminist engagements (Falola 2021, par 4, 9). According to the result of Nigeria's 2023 general election, Ekiti state now has the highest number of female lawmakers in any state (sub-national) level both in the southwest geopolitical zone and in the country (*Daily Trust* 2023). The table below gives the breakdown of women's representation in all six states in Nigeria's South West geopolitical zone, where women's representation is the highest.

Table 1: Distribution of women's representation in the HoA in the six states of the southwest geopolitical zone of Nigeria from 1999 to 2023

State	Number of Seats	Number of Women Elected							State Total
		1999	2003	2007	2011	2015	2019	2023	
Lagos	40	3	2	5	7	4	3	4	28
Ekiti	26	0	1	0	4	2	4	6	17
Ogun	26	0	1	2	2	2	4	2	13
Ondo	26	0	1	1	1	2	1	3	9
Oyo	32	0	0	1	1	2	1	2	7
Osun	26	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	2
Total	176	3	4	7	11	8	11	17	76

Source: Legislative records in the selected HoAs and INEC database

Ikere Local Government Area (LGA) where this study was carried out is one of the 16 LGAs which makes up Ekiti state. Also, as one of the six LGAs in the Ekiti South Senatorial District where women's representation remains highly visible across the three arms and levels of government, the LGA has the highest population after Ekiti South-West LGA (City Population Administrative Division, 2022). In addition, the Ikere LGA occupies a more strategic location in terms of proximity to the state capital, Ado-Ekiti (see the map of study location in Figure 1) where resources and strategies for party activities are mobilised. This LGA has also produced the highest number of deputy governors (four) in the state since the beginning of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999 (Nairaland Forum 2017;

Politicians Data 2018; Modern Ghana 2013; Government of Ekiti State 2024). The third republican governor of the old Ondo state from which Ekiti state was carved out in 1996 was also from this LGA (Agency Report 2020). See Figure 1 below for a map of the study area.

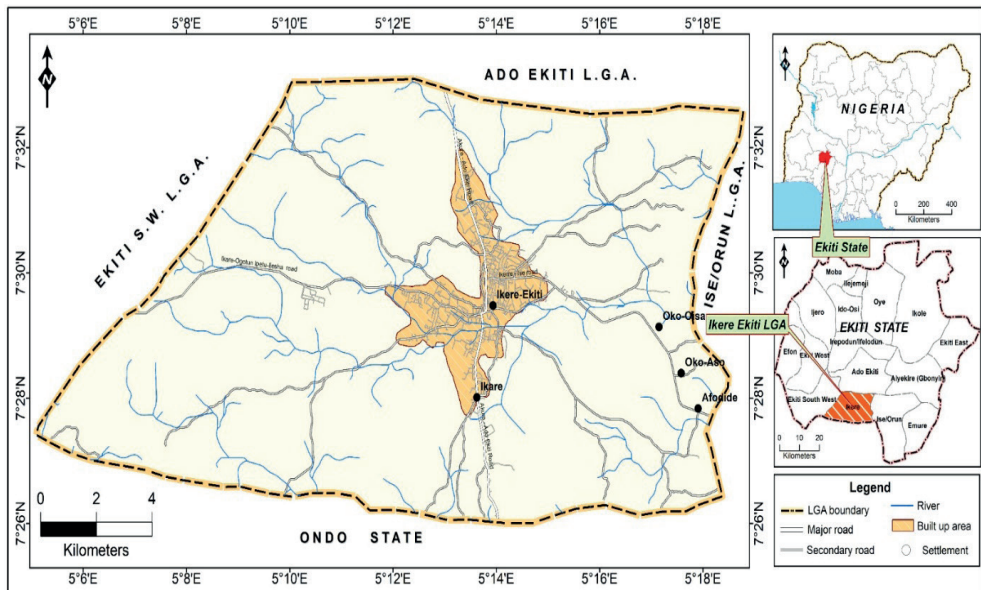


Figure 1: Map of Ikere Local Government Area, Ekiti State, Nigeria

Source: ©Adedeji Victor ADEBAYO

This article begins by analysing the role of women as political mobilisers. It then proceeds to discuss women as a specific target of election mobilisation. Finally, it explores the vulnerability of women to material gifting strategies of politicians in a clientelist political configuration such as Nigeria (Omobowale & Olutayo, 2007; Roelofs, 2018; Stockemer & Amaechi, 2023). The study employs a qualitative approach to elicit data that engaged the research objectives. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to allow for flexibility and to adapt to unanticipated responses, which in many instances led to follow-up questions. In all, we conducted 24 interviews. These included seven key informant interviews with the leaders of the major political parties – four from the All Progressives Congress (APC), one from the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), two from the Labour Party (LP), and seventeen in-depth interviews with members of academia,

market women and religious leaders, as well as interested onlookers who were not affiliated to any political party. All of them were purposively selected. In addition, three rounds of observations were conducted.

The first observation was carried out at the local secretariats of the aforementioned leading political parties during the week of the national elections (presidential and national assembly) held on Saturday 25 February 2023. Also, a polling unit in Agbado Oyo area of the LGA was observed from the start of the voting exercise until the ballots were counted and results announced. Another round of observation was repeated for the state (sub-national) election¹ which was conducted on Saturday 18 March at the same location.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Anne Phillips' (1995) theory of the politics of presence was utilised to align this study with an existing body of knowledge. The central tenet of this theory speaks to the essence of ethnic or gender composition of elected legislative bodies. It describes these compositions as a legitimate democratic concern which must never be overlooked. As such, a proportionate representation based on these attributes is essential (Phillips 1995, p. 1). Therefore, in the specific case of gender, this theory suggests that women should represent women's interests because they are in the best position to do so. This argument is premised upon the differences between men and women in their everyday life experiences (Wängnerud 2009; Phillips 1995), owing to the fact that, to some extent, female lawmakers share the experiences of other women.

While there are some arguments which underplay the importance of gender in legislative policymaking, and claim that legislative assemblies influence politicians more than politicians influence them, there are more agreements in research that gender has an important role to play in shaping legislative policymaking. According to Lovenduski and Norris (2003), what varies is the level of impact. As research has demonstrated that female politicians support the interests of women, literature on women's political participation highlights the need for electing more women to positions of power across all branches of government (Wängnerud 2009). Moreover, it is believed that women legislators embrace priorities which deal with issues of women, children, and family; and

1 Only the House of Assembly (an autonomous sub-national assembly) election was conducted in Ekiti State in the general elections of 2023. While elections have been held every four years since 1999, gubernatorial elections in some states now fall outside the regular election cycle (Off-Cycle Elections) due to verdicts from the judiciary which has annulled some election results and helped reclaim mandates in specific cases. One of these is Ekiti State's gubernatorial election which was held on 18 June 2022.

that generally, women favour more liberal welfare policy preferences than men. Importantly, expanding women's political representation has been observed to ensure noticeable gains for democratic governance. Such gains include citizen's needs-centred policy development, cooperation across party lines, and more sustainable peace (National Democratic Institute 2012).

The choice of this theory is predicated on the premise of its fundamental suppositions which provide reasons for the numerical presence of women on legislative policy outcomes. An important question which Phillips raises is how men legitimately accommodate the representation of women, especially on specific women's issues (Phillips 1995). This concern has given rise to a measure of reforms in some democracies across the world, as with the gender quotas. These have also been embraced and adopted by a number of African countries including Algeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Kenya, Morocco, Mozambique, Rwanda and Uganda (Dimitrova & Obasanjo 2019, p. 173; Bauer 2019, p. 4). Remarkably, developing countries have outpaced the more developed democracies in the drive for increased women's representation (Bauer & Burnet 2013). For example, Rwanda currently ranks top of the list in its share of women in national parliaments in the world (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2023). This is due largely to the adoption of gender quota legislation (Clayton, Josefsson & Wang 2016, pp. 1-2).

The volume of research examining the dynamics and impact of gender quotas has also increased and indicates that, rather than waiting for cultural and socio-economic development to turn the tide in favour of women's numerical increase, this affirmative action strategy has the potential to increase the number of women in the legislature quite significantly over a short period of time. Also, by acknowledging the importance of numerical presence on legislative outcomes, the theory of the politics of presence establishes a link between descriptive representation (who holds office) and substantive representation (policies initiated and laws passed).

However, this study notes that this affirmative action policy, which is usually meant to counter the effect of discrimination and underrepresentation, could also reinforce prejudice within an under-represented group. This is particularly the case when grievances regarding the political recruitment process as a democratic feature of fairness and impartiality implies, are not taken into account.

The following section demonstrates how women contribute to political parties' successes at the polls, but that they have never really had a full opportunity to contest or negotiate their candidacies except in cases of discretionary imposition by party leaderships.

WOMEN AS MOBILISERS

Despite various international corrective measures, the underrepresentation of women has remained a global phenomenon. This has continued to have a negative impact on the rights of women and how such rights are respected. With regard to political power dynamics in a democracy, particularities within the context of political parties and an individual country's culture account for the number of women with political representation. According to Hoodfar and Tajali (2011) a country's gender ideology, cultural and social barriers and institutional or structural barriers are the factors that affect women's upward political mobility. Studies have also observed political party leaderships to be composed almost exclusively of men (Adebayo 2023; Aluko 2015; Eniola 2018; Erlich & Beauvais 2023). These men could conveniently dictate who gets what, except in few cases where deliberate efforts have been initiated to ensure gender equality in party executive committees as in the case of Demos (a Romanian political party) (Bogdan 2018). Women have generally had to play by the rules of men both within political parties and at governmental levels in order to survive (Chowdhury 2018).

In Nigeria, women hold only about six per cent of elective positions (Nkereuwem 2023). In this specific political context, cultural and social barriers appear to be enduring. As can be gleaned from the interviews conducted with party leaders, equality between men and women remains inconsistent with the cultural and social practices of the people where men are required to fulfil a traditional role of main financial provider (Kim & Luke 2020). This is an important component of hegemonic masculinity which reinforces men's dominance and the subordination of women. In the words of one of these party leaders (interviewed on 23 February 2023):

There is no equality. You are trying to drive at equality between man, no no... I will not allow, and I won't subscribe to that. Because if you want to preach equality, will equality come to role[s] being played in a family? No matter how rich a woman is, she will still rely on her husband when it comes to the payment of school fees of children and the rest... There is nothing you can do without consideration being given to tradition and culture. If culture is still there in place (sic), I doubt if that will happen.

The perception of this financial role, including that of protection and leadership in the home, has continued to privilege men as the head of the household and, by extension the community, prioritising women's roles essentially as mothers and wives above all other duties (Hoodfar & Tajali 2011).

Moreover, as pointed out by Nkereumen (2023), it is important to understand the attrition rate of women in Nigeria's electoral politics from the intricacies of the pre-election phase where the supply of female candidates is limited, rather than the end of the electoral cycle. An interview with yet another party leader (on 24 February 2023) succinctly captures this from a psychological dimension:

Let me say, in this part of the world, that inferiority complex is still noticeable among women that are still aspiring to political office. And like I used to say, power is not served *a la carte*. You must work for it, you agitate for it, you grab it. But women just believe that, because I am a woman, if I am contesting, they should just leave it for me... Let us even rate it now. How many women are contesting for this House of Assembly election in Ekiti state?

This finding is consistent with Lawless and Fox's (2012) and Kevane's (2014, p. 269) studies which noted that women are more likely to see political environments as being biased against them, and as such, are less likely to present themselves, be nominated, and be elected for political office.

Moreover, in Nigeria, political parties usually make provision for the office of women leaders in party leadership. Their responsibilities are largely concerned with galvanising women's support and guarantee their unwavering loyalty for electoral success (interview with woman leader of one of the political parties in the Ikere LGA, 23 February 2023). In most cases, this is the only area women are found to occupy across the different levels of a typical Nigerian political party leadership. As a result, women constitute an infinitesimal minority whose opinion can have little impact, especially in terms of candidates' selection. However, in preparing for any election, it was observed that women's capacity to mobilise candidates is highly exploited. For example, during our observation of a specific party secretariat on the eve of the national election, several women (and a few men) were seen providing logistics to mobilise party loyalists by distributing consumer goods. On the day of election, some women were also observed to be serving as party agents for their respective political parties.

With respect to candidates' selection, this study reveals that becoming a candidate at the local level requires more than active involvement in party activities in a registration area (ward) or the strength of local popularity. As noted by a former chairman of a major party, such matters are not discussed at local meetings but at stakeholders' meetings. These are usually convened in state capitals, outside the domain of these registration areas which are at grassroots level. These meetings are mostly informal and are sometimes held in hotels during

hours which are not convenient for women to attend due to family responsibilities and societal stereotypes.

Here, modalities of primary election exercises are worked out and issues of women's representation are discussed when it is considered necessary to enhance the image of the party as being gender sensitive and women friendly. However, this is usually done in a masculine milieu where only the male perspective determines what is good for the women. In an interview conducted on 24 February 2023, the interviewee commented:

... [in a] general meeting, we discuss mutual [issues], we discuss how we can win elections. Then the progress of the party, how we will be able to counter the opposition, all those things... Or if there is [any] empowerment [programme], we will discuss how it will get across to all other areas. But to be a candidate, you cannot discuss it during general meetings. Stakeholders meeting, you attend it. The stakeholders meeting at times, you do it in the night. At times wee hours of the day, like 12 'o' clock [am]. Before morning, everybody has [sic: everything would have been] settled.

Besides, the few women (usually women leaders) who are called to join stakeholders' meetings have noticeably become reinforcers of these patriarchies. Rather than working for the interests of women by amplifying issues of concern to them, they have often been accused of complicity in the exclusion of women by the party's leadership structure. When asked about this complicity, a women leader responded, '*well, there is nothing I can do*'. In an interview conducted on 30 October 2022, she emphasised further that it is important for a potential female candidate to take time to investigate the position of the party leadership before obtaining the nomination form to formalise her intention, otherwise her effort might be wasted. In her words:

The party may decide not to sell form to just anybody [out of the aspiring female candidates]. So, after much deliberation, they will call those candidates '... we are taking [selecting] only one person... and you are two or three vying for this thing [position], so let's wait for the party[']s decision' (sic). So, after much deliberation, party may take a step. Out of five of them, we pick one. So, it is that one they pick [select] that will go and obtain form, not all of them, in order not to waste their money. So, we adopted that system in the last dispensation.

Why would some women become a willing tool in the hands of men who continue to perpetuate patriarchal hegemony? The very weak numerical presence where

only one or few women are part of a political party's decision-making is unlikely to sway positions in women's favour. More so, it appears as though women have not yet transformed from being a class 'in itself' to a class 'for itself'. This was clearly demonstrated by the #EndSARS protest in 2020 mass protest by Nigerian youth against police harassment and brutality. Peter Obi's Obidient movement² in the build-up to the general elections of 2023 also shared a similar trajectory.

Also, the experience of Sarah Jubril, a PDP female presidential aspirant who received only a single vote in the 2011 primary elections, still resonates with many. This raises questions regarding the philosophy, purpose and mechanism which drive the quest for women's upward political mobility, especially by women (Obot 2020; *PM news* 2011). Women thus remain at the mercy of the patriarchal party structure which has continued to marginalise them in decision-making roles. However, this accusation of complicity requires vital clarification in order not to essentialise women as perpetual enemies. Women do not necessarily form a category of common interest. They are individuals who have different personalities, trajectories and ideas about governance, and it is not out of place for them to disagree on what the configuration of governance should be, how it is to be run or by whom.

Interestingly, some women have been able to occupy elective positions as indicated in Table 1. However, the processes leading to the emergence of these women as party candidates are increasingly a subject of concern and scrutiny. Expressing this concern, a party leader (interviewed on 24 February 2023) noted:

During [administration withheld], they ceded some number of councillors to women, number of local government chairman[ship] and vice chairman[ship] to women. The house of assembly member, they could say, ok, four or five, may be women... So so constituency (sic: a specific constituency), we need a woman so that the men will not compete with them there.

Further interrogation has demonstrated a puppet and reward arrangement. On assumption of office political godfathers and party leaders, including state governors, also claim a party leadership role and could offer loyal female supporters party tickets to contest in elections. They have been seen to instrumentalise gender inclusivity rhetoric whenever they want to impose female candidates whom they consider could be useful to advance their political objectives.

In explaining how political parties select candidates in a primary election, a politician and former state lawmaker highlighted three strategies. Firstly, there is a consensus arrangement whereby party leaders use background checks and

2 For more information on the Obidient Movement, see <https://obidient.org>

interviews to select a sole candidate whom others are obliged to support in the main election (Bakare 2022; Sahara Reporters 2022). Secondly, a political party may adopt a delegate system of indirect primary election whereby party executives or special delegates are selected to vote for party candidates. Lastly, there is the direct primary election where all registered members of a political party are eligible to vote in a primary election.

While noting that none of these strategies is immune from the influence and manipulation of party leaders and clientelist gimmicks such as bribery, for example, this politician argued that the delegate system could be conveniently organised and supervised, unlike the direct primary system. In his words (interview on 23 February 2023):

It depends on what the leaders want, and they have their ways of choosing what system to adopt. For the direct primary system, it is always difficult. Crises, ballot stuffing, chaos, resource stealing. The party might not be able to give account. Even if there are cases of rigging in the delegate system, it will still be better when compared to the problems associated with direct primary system.

He noted further that party leaders who have vested interests in specific female candidates usually favour the adoption of a direct primary system where the process is usually expected to be rowdy and violent. Once this happens, organisers of the primary election are called to retreat to the party secretariat where party leaders can then conveniently make arbitrary decisions and field their preferred candidates. Another party executive (interviewed on 24 February 2023) claimed that:

This [personality withheld], to a reasonable extent, even if it is not democratic enough... But they made sure of one thing. Anywhere that woman is contesting for any position, it is that woman. But like I said, they wouldn't allow that to emerge through a democratic process. They will just hijack... They will just write the name of the woman that she is the winner of the election... because that one is a man, and the other contestant is a woman, or because there is a vested interest in someone.

While the call for women's inclusion has been justified on many grounds (Muleya 2012; Kevane 2014), findings from this study revealed that a tendency to abuse this inclusive arrangement has often accompanied the process.

Scholars studying the role of women in electoral politics have noted that the process of candidate selection within political parties and the type of electoral

systems adopted for elections have huge impacts on women's electoral successes, and an increased number of women in political assemblies. Extensive research in this area has therefore led to the recommendation of a fast-track approach through gender quotas (Hoodfar & Tajali 2011; Bauer & Burnet 2013; Bauer 2019; Lawless & Fox 2012). Although the international experience is uneven, this measure has increased women's share of the global parliamentary representation by 70% (Rosen 2017). Adopting this approach either by setting a percentage within political parties, as in a voluntary political party quota, legislative quota or reserved seat (Hoodfar & Tajali 2011) could help redress the disaffection which discretionary affirmative action by party leaders sometimes generate.

WOMEN AS A MOBILISED GROUP

Do women vote as much as men do or do they constitute a larger percentage of voters? Perceptions are that there is a higher turnout rate of female voters. However, in the context of this study, we have decided to tread with caution. Although an empirical analysis such as that by Holman, Schneider and Pondel (2015) confirms higher women's voters' turnout in US elections, information available in the public domain in Nigeria shows the population of men to be slightly higher (Statista 2023). Also, according to INEC's voters' registration record, there are fewer women voters (47.5%) as against the men's 52.5% (Nkereuwem 2023). Additionally, as there is no statistical evidence to show that women vote more or less often than men, we rely on our observation to conclude that they vote just as often as men do. Nevertheless, many of our interviewees alluded to the seriousness with which women go about their civic responsibility, specifically voting. According to a party leader interviewed on 23 February 2023:

How many of the men come out during elections? Some of the elites, they prefer watching television than coming out to vote during election. But the women, irrespective of their status, they have to... You will see, by tomorrow, when you are going to the field, you will see more of the women than men. A lot. We have one [polling station] at Eleyo here, we have one at the Palace here and they have one at Sawmill [another location], so there are three [polling units] along this street [road]. Before you get to NITEL [another location down the road], there are about four.

On the day of election, we observed early arrivals of elderly men and women at the polling unit. Many of these elders voted and left almost immediately. Young and middle-aged men and women, some of whom also came early were seen

to be discussing several issues, including the current election. Male and female party agents alike were also present to monitor the election process and to reach out to eligible voters whom they had canvassed, to ensure that they did get out to vote. While it is illegal for campaigning to continue in the 24 hours before the commencement of voting (Electoral Act 2022), this practice was observed by both female and male political party agents as the voting proceeded.

Few scholars have drawn attention to the importance of courting female voters. These works have revealed the use of identity in their voting decision (Brians 2005, pp. 357-375; Abdullah 2012, pp. 36-40). As noted by Mansbridge (1999, pp. 628-657), attempts by campaigns to woo female voters can have implications for women's substantive and descriptive representation. Therefore, understanding the reactions of women is crucial to predict 'current and future political context' (Holman, Schneider & Pondel 2015, p. 817). The role of gender in politics has been emphasised often enough to target women strategically in order to gain their support. Campaign strategists have specifically targeted female voters as this type of identity-based targeting could resonate with their affective orientation (Holman, Schneider & Pondel 2015, p. 816). Unlike issue-based targeting which tries to evaluate candidates regarding the kind of attention and agenda they are likely to support, identity-based targeting appears to be accorded greater attention.

This study reveals that political parties exert significant effort to reach out to female voters by lobbying women leaders within their parties and market leaders as well as women associations outside these parties. They do this not only by word and in print, but with cash and material gifts as well, a common practice associated with clientelist politics (Hicken & Nathan 2020). According to Mansbridge (1999), public statements of appeal to women's identity are often used to emphasise that a candidate running for office has the ability to represent female voters. Holman, Schneider and Pondel (2015) narrated how several United States politicians specifically target women in their campaign with sophisticated analytics to enhance their chances of either winning their votes or derailing the chances their opponent will benefit from such advantage. Candidates have been observed canvassing expressly for women's votes only, addressing not only specific issues concerning women, but also those affecting the general public good. This is because candidates target more groups than just women. However, capturing women's interests has remained an important priority for political candidates.

VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN TO MATERIAL GIFTING STRATEGIES

Women bear the greater part of the burden of reproductive labour – apart from child bearing and raising, this includes domestic activities such as cooking,

cleaning, washing and the general maintenance of the home. Political parties' campaign machinery capitalises on this in order to garner support from them by offering cash, food items and other house utensils. Observation revealed that apart from cash gifts handed out or promised on the day of elections, items such as clothes, detergents, liquid soap, salt, tomato paste, rice, beans, gari³ and Maggi⁴ were distributed to voters on the eve of the first round of the elections. These products are basic consumer goods; no matter how inexpensive, they are a pricey commodity for the poor, many of whom were women who valued them because of their benefits. Women's groups have provided a fertile ground for clientelist politics. Roelofs (2019, p. 416) in her analysis of programmatic and patrimonial politics in Nigeria noted how TraderMoni⁵ was deliberately used by the incumbent prior to the 2019 national elections. Women were in most cases the recipients of these soft loans which were heavily criticised as a form of sophisticated vote-buying because of the proximity to the election period. As this study demonstrates, more often than not campaign strategies in Nigeria would encompass women's empowerment (Mimiko 2007) by capitalising on their material deprivation. On the eve of the presidential election in February 2023 cartons of material goods were distributed, with women leaders essentially coordinating this activity.

Although poverty is experienced by both men and women, global tendencies suggest that women are the most affected by it (Lesetedi 2018). Women have been observed to be more vulnerable due to societal stereotypes, cultural norms and life course events which often do not enhance their potentials (Bako & Syed 2018). Women have been limited by the kind of resources and support systems available to them, regardless of how capable, resourceful and productive they might be (Nwankwor, Manda & Nkereuwem 2022). Specifically, women-headed households are more likely to suffer deprivation and severe economic marginalisation (Lesetedi 2018). For these reasons, the importance of gender analysis has been consistently emphasised as a key element in development process. In a patriarchal society such as Nigeria which privileges men and where investment in women remains underwhelming (Nwankwor, Manda & Nkereuwem 2022), women face multiple layers of challenges in lifting themselves out of poverty. Many do not appear to be self-sufficient enough to make independent choices either within the political party structure or as voters.

3 Cassava flour is commonly used in making a particular type of swallow food referred to as eba.

4 A commercial seasoning.

5 In 2016, the Federal Government of Nigeria launched a government enterprise and empowerment programme, TraderMoni. The initiative was designed to boost the Nigerian economy and help petty traders expand their business through access to collateral free loans.

CONCLUSION

Although women's political representation has been studied extensively, the enduring skewed gender representation in political governance has ensured that it remains a topic of scholarly attention. To this end, the study employed a micro-level approach by focusing on a specific Local Government Area – constitutionally the lowest tier of government in Nigeria. Whereas some of the findings about women's political participation could be seen as a given, a qualitative analysis of women's political recruitment as articulated in this study provides more nuance to the concerns. While women are, in most cases, relegated to being spectators rather than being active political participants, there are those who have attained important elective positions. However, this is through a patriarchal structure activated by political party leaders and godfathers who attempt to appear gender sensitive and women friendly.

The study analysed the strategies for selecting party candidates. It notes how none of these strategies is totally free from the influence and manipulation of political party leaders and clientelist gimmicks. As a result, these leaders can field candidates, especially women candidates, in whom they have a vested interest.

This study further highlights the role of women as political mobilisers whose capacity to rally voters is exploited during elections. Also, it observes that while women have been credited for the seriousness with which they perform their civic responsibility of voting, there is still no statistical analysis of gender to show whether they vote more or less often than men do. Because our observation is also limited in this regard, we have concluded that women vote just as often as men. Finally, the study revealed how political parties' campaign machinery capitalised on the experience of poverty, which most affects women, to garner their support by offering consumer goods and cash incentives.

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