



Women Political Underrepresentation in Nigeria: The Key Issues and the Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

Background: Gender equality remains a pressing global issue, with many governments struggling to provide equal opportunities for women in governance. Despite various efforts, Nigeria continues to struggle with the underrepresentation of women in politics, with women occupying less than 10% of political seats.

Objectives: This study examined the factors hindering women from participating fully in politics and assessed how well government policies have succeeded in increasing women's political involvement.

Method: The study adopted a descriptive research design, and targeted two (2) wards in Ikeja, Lagos State, with an estimated population of 400,000. A purposive sampling method was used to select 150 politically active women (75 from each ward), ensuring quality insights while balancing feasibility and data depth. Through structured questionnaire containing 15 questions, 150 responses were collected and analysed using descriptive statistics.

Results: Cultural norms, patriarchal mind-sets, and religious beliefs hinder women's political participation, while financial challenges and party discrimination also limit female representation. Government policies have made little impact due to poor implementation.

Conclusion: Addressing these barriers requires challenging cultural norms, providing financial and family support, and improving legal protection for women in politics.

Unique Contribution: This study provides fresh insights into how socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers together limit women's political participation in Nigeria.

Key Recommendation: There is need for public awareness campaigns, financial support for women, stronger legal reforms, and better policy implementation to enhance women's political participation.

Keywords: Women, Inequality, Politics, Representation, Participation.



INTRODUCTION

Gender equality remains a pressing global issue, with many governments struggling to provide equal opportunities for women in governance. Efforts to achieve gender equality date back to the late 19th century, focusing on advocacy for women's voting rights and participation in politics (Ryan & Woods, 2016). Historical reforms, such as the 1923 Equal Rights Amendment, The Inter-American Convention, and the Beijing Conference have been pivotal in securing women's property rights, reshaping their societal roles, and encouraging gender equality in political participation (Abah, 2023). This hot topic started garnering increasing attention, particularly through initiatives like the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5, to promote gender equity and increase women's political participation in all countries of the world (United Nations, 2015). Though constitutional reforms to improve women's political participation are being discussed, progress remains slow. However, despite these advancements, discriminatory practices persist across social, religious, and economic sectors, continuing to hinder progress toward full gender equality in political representation (True, 2020 and Odoemelam, & Nwafor, 2012).

In Nigeria, women make up approximately 50% of the population (National Population Commission, 2021), despite women constituting over half of Nigeria's population and actively participating in elections—with 51%, women remain significantly underrepresented in political leadership (Obaoye & Wenli, 2022). The establishment of the National Commission for Women in 1989, along with the rise of women's advocacy NGOs focused on cultural reforms, have been important efforts to improve women's participation in governance and contribute to Nigeria's overall progress. Despite these efforts, studies by Adenekan, (2022) and Suleiman, (2017), have highlighted factors such as gender stereotypes, religious norms, and patriarchal systems as a hindrance to women's political involvement. Similarly, (Aligwe, & Nwafor, 2017; Afolabi, 2020; Kiplimo & Amunga, 2021; Taiwo et al., 2019) on women's exclusion from politics, combined with restricted access to education and persistent cultural and religious discrimination, raise serious concerns about equity and fairness in governance; patriarchal structures continue to confine women to domestic roles, limiting their potential for political engagement and leadership, despite the importance of their participation in ensuring political stability and balanced power distribution.

Studies by Adamu (2023), Adedayo et al. (2023, p. 551), Bako and Syed (2018), Banjo (2023), Enaifoghe (2019), Li (2024), and Nwabunkeonye (2014) explored the barriers to women's political involvement through the lenses of gender stereotypes, religious norms, and patriarchal systems. However, there is a notable paucity of literature specifically addressing the intersection of these factors in detail within the Nigeria context due to methodological gap. To narrow down the broader view these studies have found, this paper seeks to fill the gap by examining deeply the interplay of cultural, social, and political dynamics that influence women's representation in Nigeria using a descriptive research design approach to understand the challenges women face, identify strategies for fostering equitable governance thereby contributing to existing discourse on women's political participation in Nigeria.



Research questions:

1. What institutional, Cultural, economic, and social factors hinder women's political participation in Nigeria, and how do these barriers impact their representation in governance?
2. To what extent have government policies aimed at increasing women's political representation in Nigeria been effective.
3. What are the key obstacles to their successful implementation?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Several studies have explored the persistent gender gap in women's political participation in Nigeria, revealing that various socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors limit women's involvement in governance. Adenekan (2022, p.88) points out that although women constitute 49% of Nigeria's population, they occupy only 4% of legislative seats, attributing this disparity to religious influences, economic barriers, and male chauvinism. Similarly, Chitongo and Ojogiwa (2021) argued that despite the recognized importance of women's involvement in governance, their participation is undervalued and insufficiently investigated in Nigeria. Both studies suggest that without legal reforms and proactive policies, women's political engagement will remain low.

Adeogun and Isola (2020) and Nwafor, Okoro, & Aligwe, (2013) emphasize that while democracy theoretically supports equality, socio-constructivist aspects of Nigerian society perpetuate gender inequality, aligning with Adedayo et al., (2023); Bako & Syed, (2018) whose works identified significant barriers to women's political participation in Nigeria, focusing on gender inequality and societal preferences for male children. In Nigeria, traditional societal norms often confine women to roles as homemakers and caregivers, limiting their opportunities for political engagement. View that cultural stereotypes and patriarchal structures serve as significant barriers. Suleiman (2017, p.42) also highlights the role of political violence and Nigeria's patriarchal system in limiting women's political involvement.

Akogwu, Udoji, and Ezeh (2022) find that despite international and national efforts like the National Gender Policy, women remain underrepresented in Nigeria's legislative and executive arms. They recommend reviewing existing laws to better support women's political ambitions. Riman et al. (2023) similarly argue that increased female political participation enhances governance and reduces corruption. Andrew (2018) broadens the discussion by comparing Nigeria with other African countries, finding that nations like Rwanda have improved women's representation through constitutional quotas, suggesting that Nigeria could adopt similar strategies to boost women's inclusion in politics. Collectively, these studies highlight the need for comprehensive legal, cultural, and institutional reforms to address the gender imbalance in Nigerian politics.

METHOD

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to investigate the factors influencing women's participation in Nigerian politics. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of women affiliated with political parties.



Sample Size and Sample Technique

The study population comprised the Alausa and Anifowoshe wards of the Ikeja Local Government Area (LGA) in Lagos State. The population of Ikeja is estimated to be 400,000 people, according to the 2022 National Population Commission report. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 75 politically active female participants from each of the two wards, resulting in a total of 150 respondents. This sampling technique provided quality insights from politically active women and helped balance feasibility with the depth of data collection.

Data Collection/Research Instrument

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The 150 questionnaires included fifteen (15) closed-ended questions designed to gather information on participants' political experiences, the barriers they face, and their views on gender equality in politics. The use of Google Forms allows for efficient data collection, broad access across Ikeja LGA, and convenience for participants while ensuring secure storage and confidentiality of responses.

Validity and Reliability of the Research Instrument

The validity of the questionnaire, which contained fifteen questions, was ensured through expert review and consultation with professionals knowledgeable about women's political participation in Nigeria. This process helped confirm that the questions were relevant and accurately reflected the study's focus. To establish reliability, a pilot study involving 150 participants was conducted. This trial phase allowed for adjustments to address any inconsistencies or ambiguities, ensuring that the instrument yielded consistent and clear responses before full-scale data collection.

Method of Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. With this approach, patterns and trends from responses were extracted, summarized and interpreted. This provided a clear overview of the factors influencing women's political participation.

DATA PRESENTATION

This section presents the findings from the data analyzed. Questionnaires were distributed via Google Forms to 150 women affiliated with political parties in the Alausa and Anifowoshe wards of Ikeja LGA, Lagos State. All 150 questionnaires were returned, resulting in a 100% response rate. The findings are discussed in detail.

Demographics of the Respondents

The demographic data presented in Table 1 to 4 provide insights into the respondents' age, educational qualifications, years of political party membership, and party affiliation. These characteristics helped us understand the background of women involved in politics and their varying levels of participation in Nigerian governance.

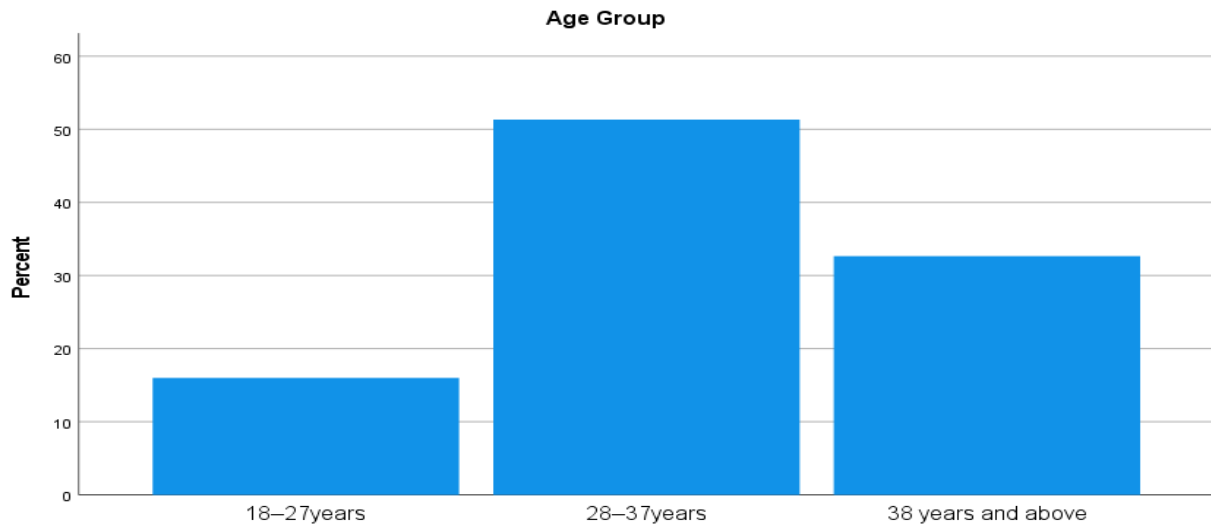


Table 1. Age Group of Respondents

The data in Table 1 showed that 51.3% of the respondents are aged between 28–37 years, making this the largest age group, followed by those aged 38 years and above (32.7%), and the youngest group, 18–27 years, representing 16%. The predominance of respondents in the 28–37 age range suggests that women in this age group are more actively engaged in political participation. This might be attributed to the fact that this demographic is at a career-building stage, where political involvement is seen as an opportunity for both personal and professional growth. The low percentage of younger women (18–27 years) indicates that socio-cultural barriers or lack of interest might prevent younger women from joining politics early.

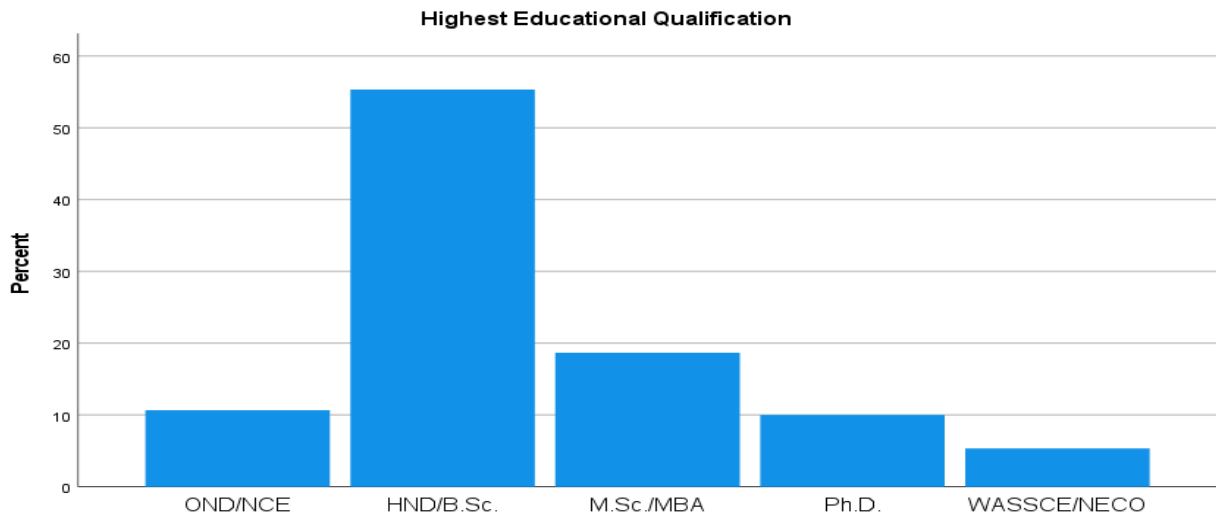


Table 2. Highest Educational Qualification of Respondents

As shown in Table 2, 55.3% of the respondents hold a Higher National Diploma (HND) or bachelor’s degree (B.Sc.), while 18.7% have master's degree (M.Sc.) or master’s in business



administration (MBA) qualifications, making these the most common educational backgrounds. Only 5.3% have the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) or National Examination Council (NECO) qualification, and 10% hold Ph.D. degrees. From these statistics, women with higher education levels are more likely to engage in political activities, as higher educational qualifications provide them with the confidence and skills needed for political participation. This reinforces the notion that education plays a key role in equipping women with the knowledge to challenge socio-cultural norms that limit their political involvement.

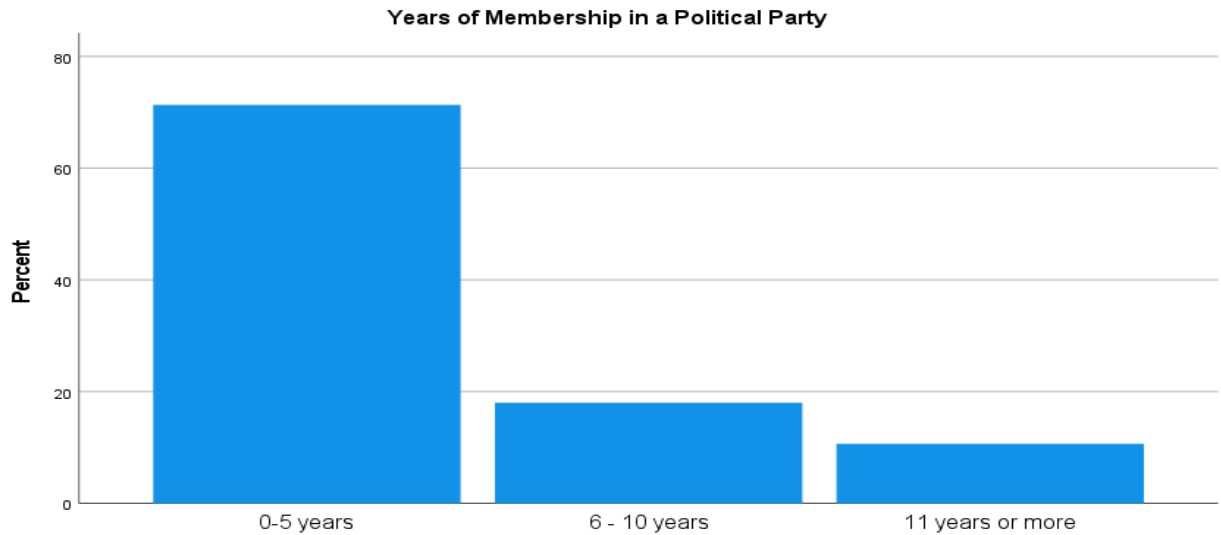


Table 3. Years of Membership in a Political Party

Table 3 indicates that 71.3% of the respondents have been members of a political party for 0–5 years, while 18% have 6–10 years of experience, and only 10.7% have been involved for 11 years or more. The overwhelming representation of newer members suggests a growing interest among women in political engagement in recent years. However, the lower percentage of long-term membership indicates that retaining women in politics remains a challenge, possibly due to the barriers they face, such as patriarchal systems and lack of support, which may discourage long-term political involvement.

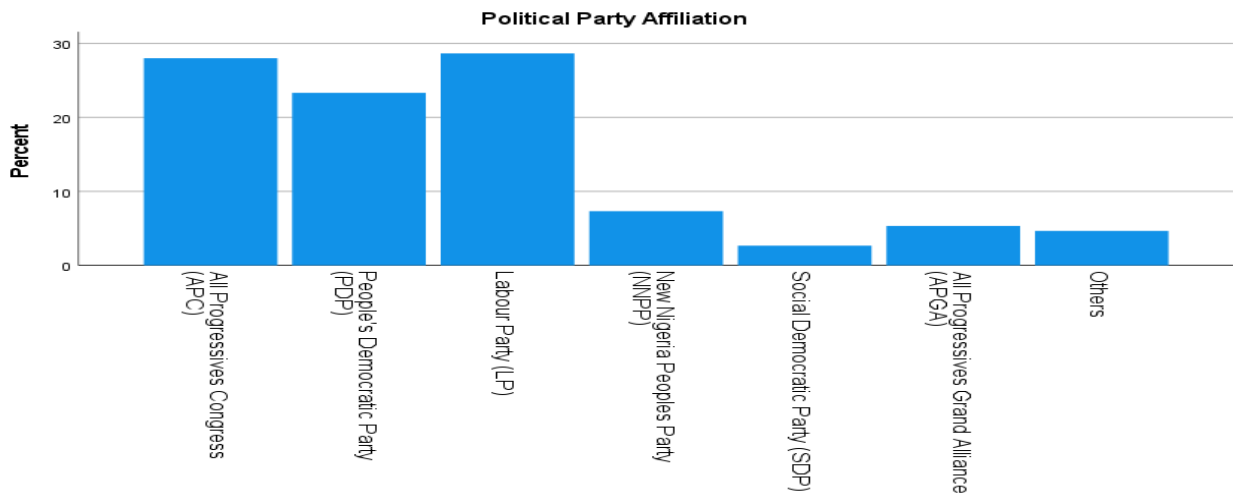


Table 4. Political Party Affiliation of Respondents

The data in Table 4 showed that most respondents are affiliated with the Labour Party (28.7%) and the All-Progressives Congress (28%), followed by the People's Democratic Party (23.3%). The dominance of these major parties indicates that women tend to join the more established political organisations, likely because they offer more resources, visibility, and opportunities for political advancement. However, smaller parties like the New Nigeria Peoples Party (7.3%) and the All-Progressives Grand Alliance (5.3%) also attract some women, which may reflect their appeal to those seeking alternatives to the mainstream political landscape.

Barriers to Women’s Political Participation in Nigeria

This section reveals the various barriers affecting women’s involvement in Nigerian politics, as identified by respondents. It examines sociocultural factors, financial constraints, discriminatory practices within political parties, family responsibilities, and the lack of educational and political training, highlighting the challenges women face in pursuing political roles. The responses are displayed in Table 5 to 10.

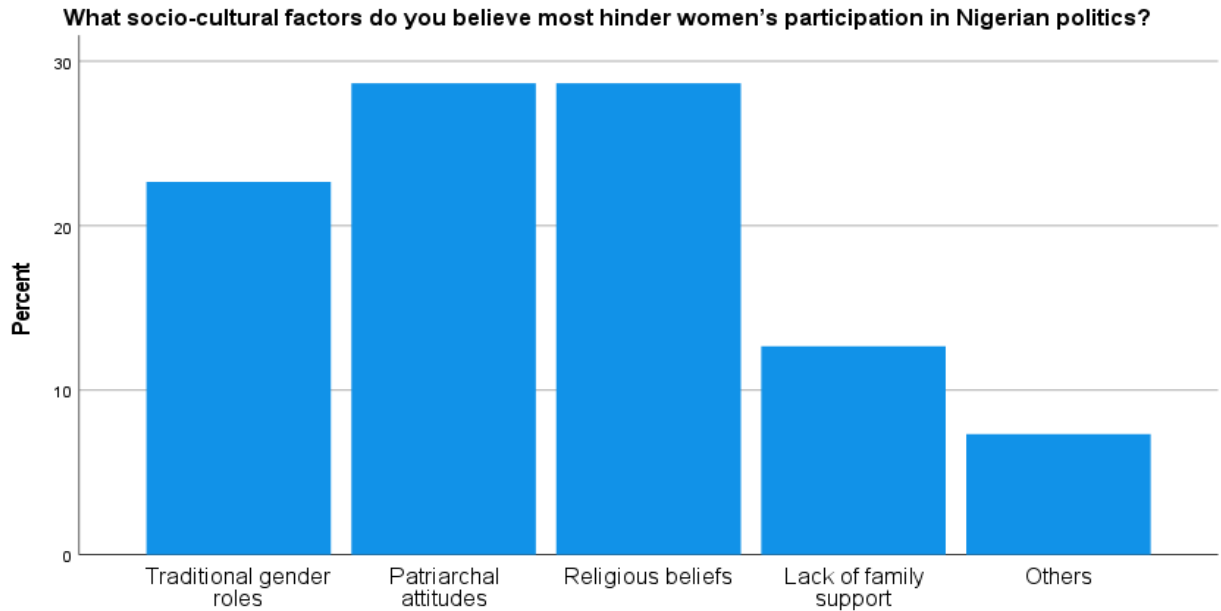


Table 5. Factors Hindering Women’s Participation in Nigerian Politics

Table 5 highlights that patriarchal attitudes and religious beliefs (28.7% each) are the most cited socio-cultural barriers to women’s political participation, followed by traditional gender roles (22.7%). These findings indicate that entrenched patriarchal systems and religious doctrines continue to limit women’s involvement in politics. The data suggests that these factors perpetuate gender inequality by reinforcing norms that view women as secondary to men in public decision-making roles, thereby hindering their political empowerment.

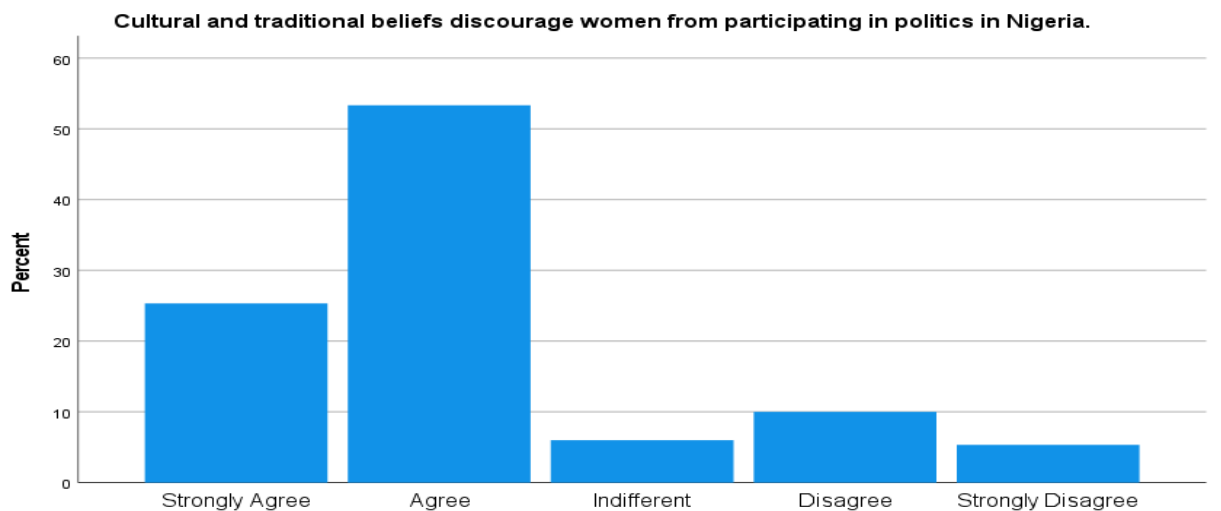


Table 6. Beliefs Discouraging Women from Participating in Politics



Table 6 showed that 53.3% of respondents agreed, and 25.3% strongly agreed, that cultural and traditional beliefs discourage women from participating in politics. This overwhelming majority reflects the significant role that socio-cultural norms play in shaping women’s political engagement. These beliefs often restrict women to domestic roles, leaving little room for public leadership, which reinforces barriers to gender equality in governance.

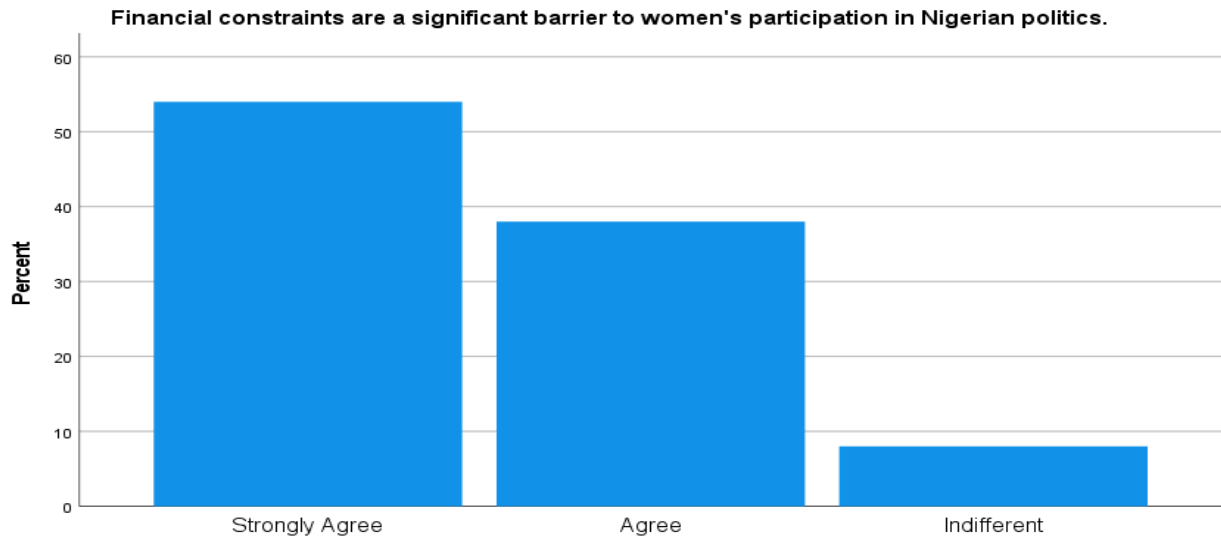


Table 7. Financial Constraints as a Barrier to Women’s Participation in Politics

According to Table 7, 54% of respondents strongly agreed, and 38% agreed, that financial constraints are a significant barrier to women’s participation in politics. Political campaigns and engagements often require substantial financial resources, which many women lack due to systemic economic inequalities. This finding is highly relevant as it highlights the need for financial support mechanisms to enable greater female political participation in Nigeria.

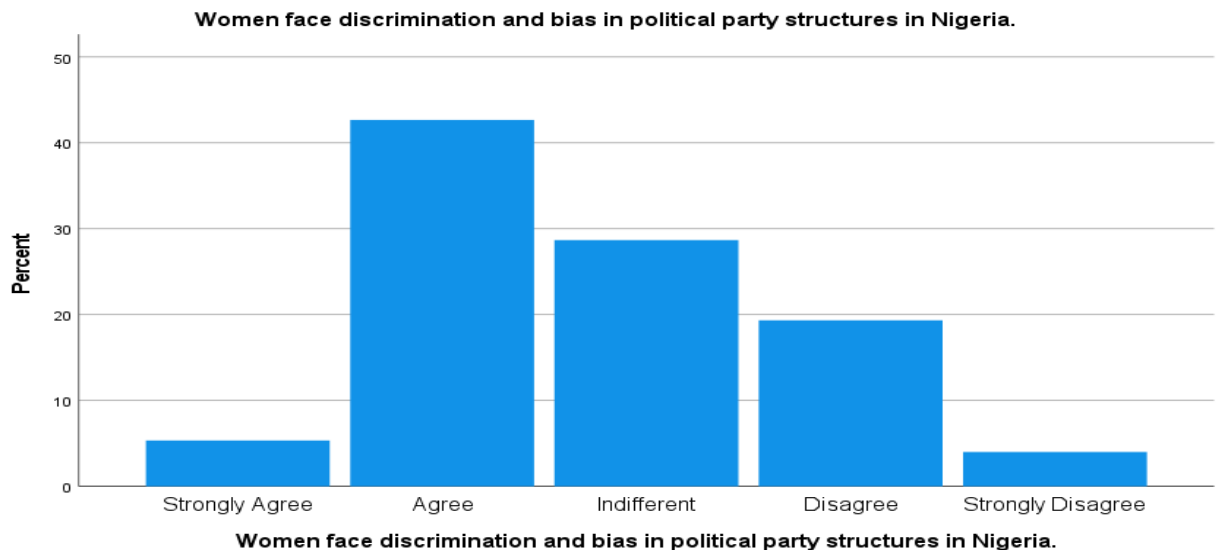




Table 8. Discrimination and Bias in Political Party Structures

Table 8 showed that 42.7% of respondents agreed, and 5.3% strongly agreed, that women face discrimination and bias within political party structures. However, 28.7% were indifferent, indicating that some respondents may not directly experience or observe these biases. Political parties in Nigeria are often male dominated, making it difficult for women to rise to leadership positions, which affects their overall political representation.

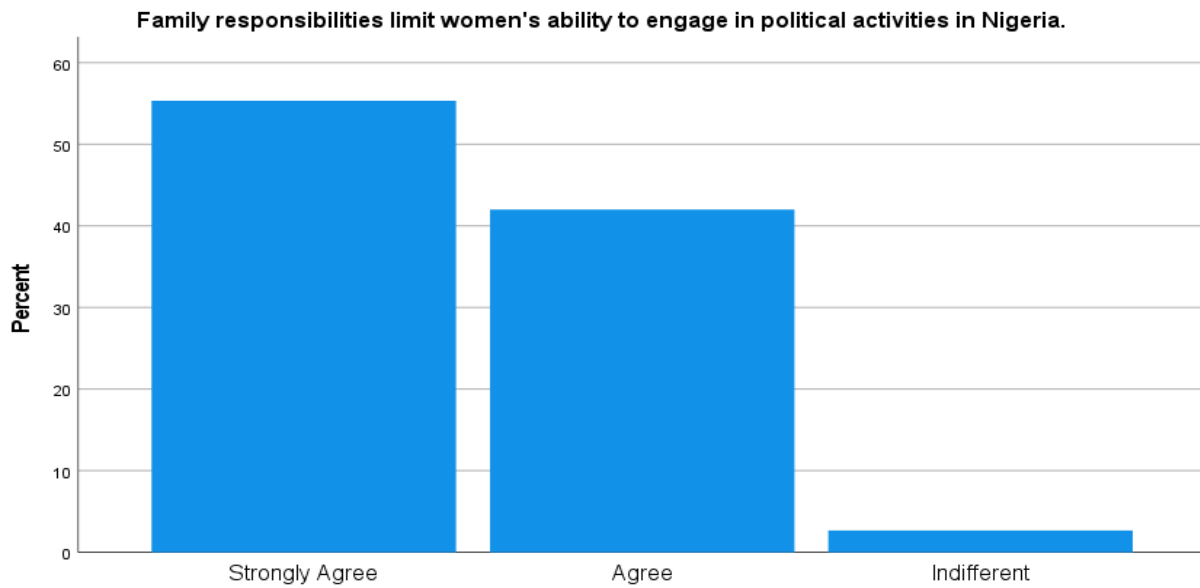


Table 9. Family Responsibilities Limiting Women’s Political Engagement

Table 9 demonstrates that 55.3% of respondents strongly agreed, and 42% agreed, that family responsibilities limit women’s ability to engage in political activities. This overwhelming response underscores the double burden many women faced, as they are expected to balance family obligations with political ambitions. This dual responsibility hinders their ability to fully commit to politics, perpetuating their underrepresentation in governance.

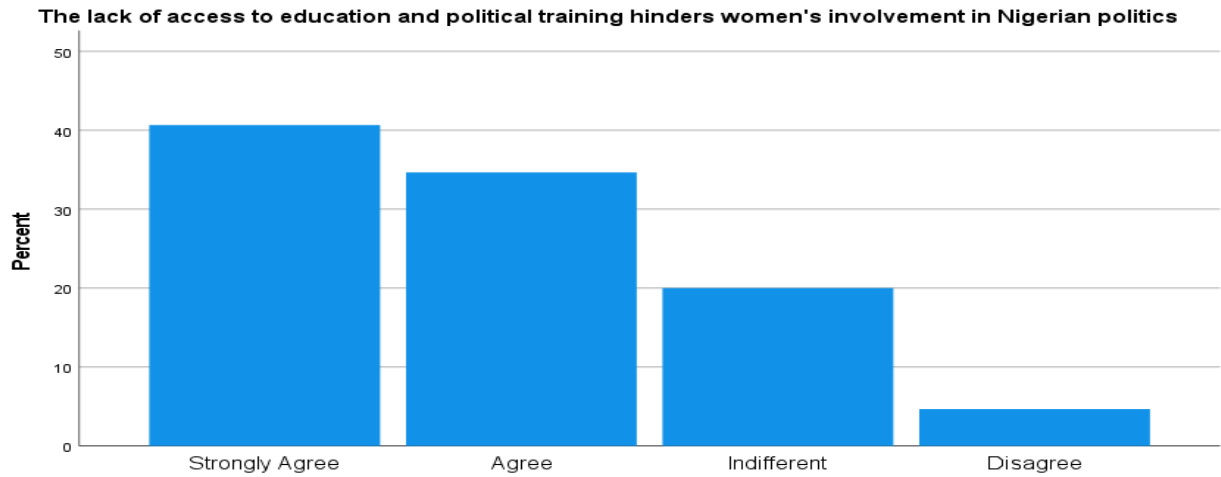


Table 10. Lack of Access to Education and Political Training

Table 10 reveals that 40.7% of respondents strongly agreed, and 34.7% agreed, that the lack of access to education and political training hinders women’s involvement in politics. This finding is significant as it emphasizes that without proper education and training, women may lack the skills and confidence needed to navigate the political landscape. Enhancing women’s political education is essential for promoting their participation in governance.

Effectiveness of Government Policies on Women’s Political Representation in Nigeria

This section evaluates how government policies have influenced women’s political representation in Nigeria. It examines respondents' views on the effectiveness of these policies, the growth in women’s political office due to inclusivity initiatives, legal protections, funding adequacy, and public awareness of related policies. The responses are displayed in Table 11 to 15.

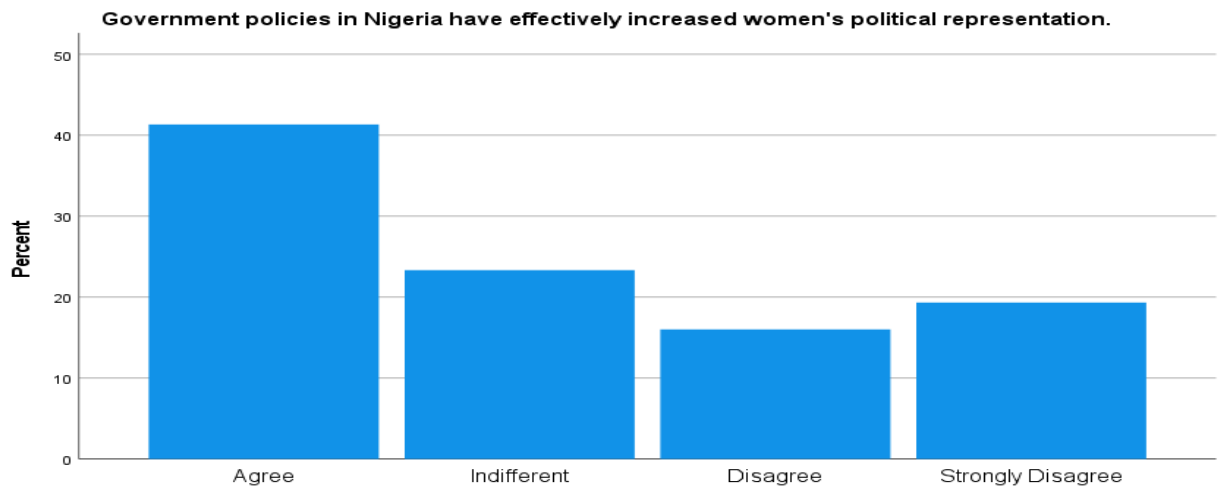


Table 11: Impact of Government Policies on Women’s Political Representation



Table 11 showed that 41.3% of respondents agreed, and 23.3% are indifferent about the effectiveness of government policies in increasing women's political representation. However, 35.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating a mixed perception of policy effectiveness. This suggests that while some government initiatives may have had a positive impact, significant gaps remain in their implementation or effectiveness, highlighting the need for more robust and visible policies to improve women's political representation.

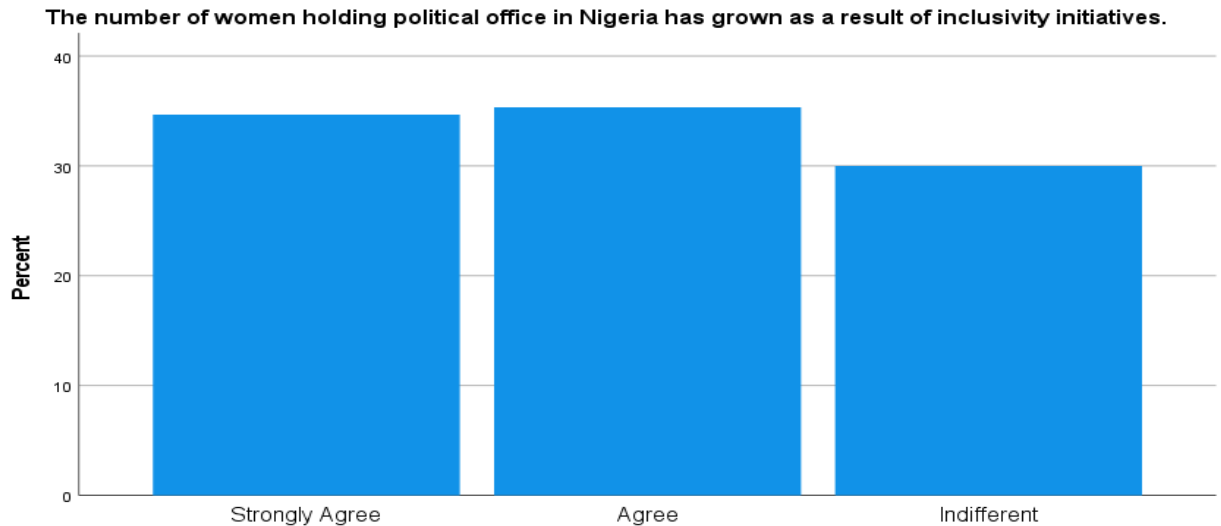


Table 12. Growth in Women Holding Political Office Due to Inclusivity Initiatives

In Table 12, 34.7% of respondents strongly agreed, and 35.3% agreed that inclusivity initiatives have increased the number of women holding political office. This indicates a positive view of recent initiatives aimed at promoting women's participation in politics. However, the 30% who are indifferent suggest that while progress is acknowledged, there may be ongoing challenges or inconsistencies in how these initiatives are perceived or experienced in practice.

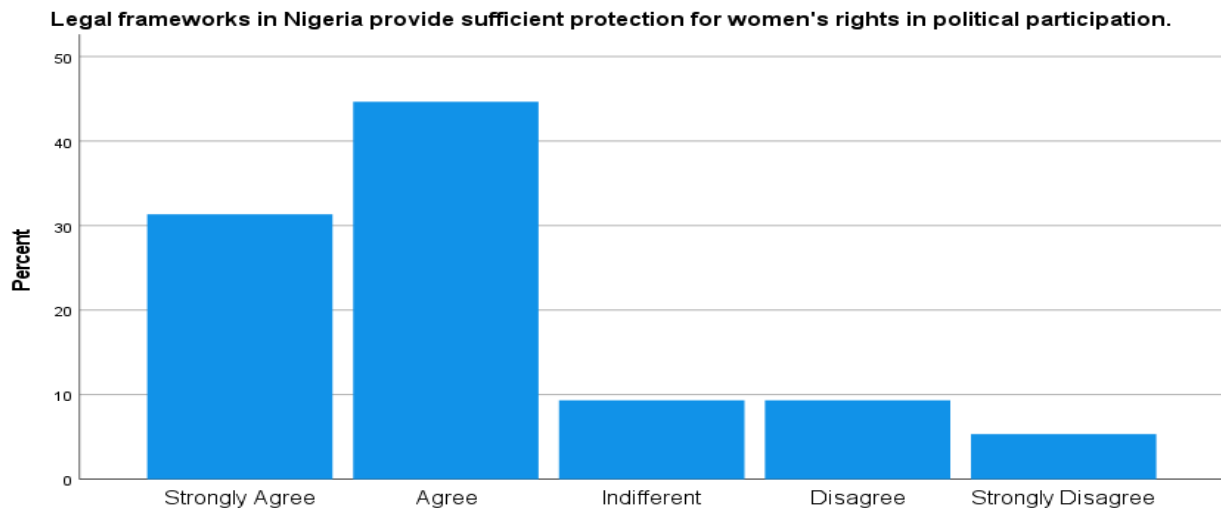




Table 13. Legal Frameworks Protecting Women’s Rights in Political Participation

Table 13 reveals that 31.3% of respondents strongly agreed, and 44.7% agreed that legal frameworks in Nigeria sufficiently protect women’s rights in political participation. Despite this, 14% are indifferent, and 14.6% disagreed, indicating that there may be perceived deficiencies or enforcement issues in these frameworks. This underscores the importance of not only having protective laws but also ensuring their effective implementation and accessibility.

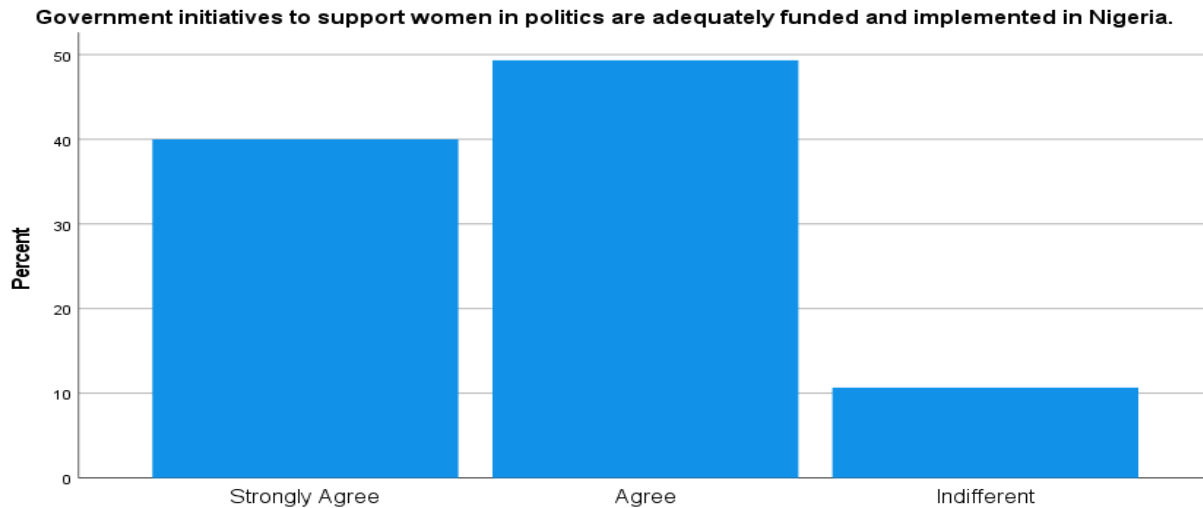


Table 14. Funding and Implementation of Government Initiatives for Women in Politics.

Table 14 showed that 40% of respondents strongly agreed, and 49.3% agreed that government initiatives to support women in politics are adequately funded and implemented. This reflects a generally positive view of the financial and operational aspects of these initiatives. However, 10.7% are indifferent, suggesting that there might be variations in perceptions or experiences of these initiatives, highlighting the need for consistent and transparent implementation across different regions.

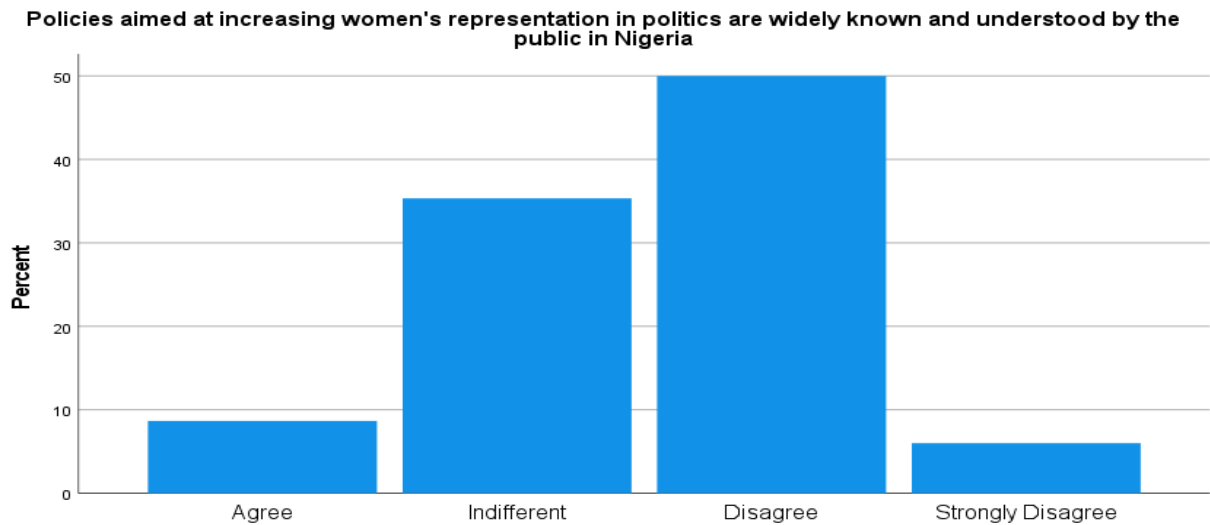


Table 15. Public Awareness of Policies Aimed at Increasing Women’s Representation

According to Table 15, only 8.7% of respondents agreed that policies aimed at increasing women's representation are widely known and understood by the public, with 50% disagreeing and 35.3% indifferent. This indicates a significant gap in public awareness and understanding of these policies. Effective communication and public engagement are crucial to ensuring that such policies are not only implemented but also recognised and supported by the wider community.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we discussed the study’s findings which focused on barriers to women's political participation in Nigeria and the impact of government policies on improving their representation, identifying key challenges and opportunities for progress.

Barriers Affecting Women's Participation in Nigerian Politics

Table 5 showed that traditional gender roles (22.7%), patriarchal attitudes (28.7%), and religious beliefs (28.7%) are key barriers to women's political participation in Nigeria. These factors reinforce gender stereotypes and limit women's opportunities in politics. Overcoming these barriers will need a cultural shift towards gender equality and more inclusive practices.

Table 6 showed that financial constraints (54%) and family responsibilities (55.3%) are major barriers to women's political participation. Financial limitations restrict access to campaign resources, while family duties reduce the time women can devote to politics. This concurs with Janusz et al., (2021) study in Brazil stating that Party elites provide female candidates less campaign resources than male candidates, undermining women's electoral prospects. Addressing these barriers would require financial support and policies that help women balance family and political responsibilities.

Additionally, Table 7 to 10 provided the role of political party structures and discrimination, which is acknowledged but cited less often than socio-cultural and financial barriers. This is similar with



Awan, (2023) study in Pakistan and Mofoluwawo & Ikeola, (2023), they found that despite the fight to increase women's political participation in political activities, there is huge discrimination and structural imbalance in political systems that hinders even the small number of women involved in politics. From the analysis it can be deduced that discrimination exists but may not be as widely recognized or impactful as other factors. Hence, measures be put in place

Impact of Government Policies on Women's Political Representation in Nigeria

The data collected and analysed revealed mixed perceptions about the effectiveness of government policies in increasing women's political representation. Table 11 showed that 41.3% of respondents agreed that policies have been effective, while 35.3% disagreed, and 23.3% were indifferent. Table 12 and 13 indicate that 34.7% strongly agreed and 35.3% agreed inclusivity initiatives have increased women in political offices, yet only 31.3% strongly agreed that legal frameworks adequately protect women's political rights. This result aligns with Ogunbodede, (2023) findings that while some initiatives to increase women's political representation in Nigeria are viewed positively, legal protections may still need improvement to fully support women's participation in politics.

Table 14 and 15 reveal that 40% strongly agreed and 49.3% agreed government initiatives are well-funded and implemented, but only 8.7% believe these policies are widely known. This indicated that despite 89.3% respondents recognized adequate funding, the lack of public awareness can undermine policy effectiveness. This agrees to Reynolds et al., (2020) study which showed that communicating evidence of policy effectiveness can increase public support. To avoid the continuous negative implication of this factor, enhancing communication strategies and increasing public visibility of these initiatives are essential steps to ensure they reach and benefit a wider audience, thereby supporting greater women's representation in Nigerian politics.

In a nutshell, promoting women's political participation in Nigeria is a process that requires deliberate and strategic plans involving the government at all levels and citizens or residents of Nigeria to fight the factors discussed above. A collaborative effort against these factors is crucial, as it will help increase women's representation in politics and gradually diminish these obstacles.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analyzed data collected from the two wards in Ikeja LGA, this study concludes that the barriers affecting women's political participation in Nigeria are deeply rooted in socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors. Traditional gender roles, patriarchal attitudes, and religious beliefs significantly hindered women's political engagement, while financial constraints and family responsibilities further limit their ability to participate effectively in politics. Although government policies have had some success in increasing women's representation as shown in table 14 and 15, their effectiveness is undermined by inadequate legal protections, limited public awareness, and uneven implementation. This conclusion calls for the need of a cultural shift towards gender equality and more inclusive practices, financially support women and policies that would help women balance family and political responsibilities and improve legal protections to fully support women's participation in politics.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, addressing socio-cultural barriers is crucial. Firstly, initiatives and policies that would challenge and balance factors such traditional gender roles, patriarchal attitudes, and restrictive religious beliefs that limit women's political participation should be established and backed by the law. Government at all levels through the Ministry of Women Affairs and Non-Governmental Organizations involved in women matters should embark on targeted public awareness campaigns, educational programs and fair media representation of women to promote political participation which in turn can help shift cultural perceptions and support gender equality.

Secondly, we recommend that women should be provided financial and family support through grants or subsidies. Introducing this will assist women in politics explore their full potentials. Along with this, policies offering flexible work arrangements which supports women's family responsibilities, affordable childcare options and parental leave should be reviewed and updated as this would enable women to balance domestic and political roles more effectively.

Finally, strengthening legal frameworks and improving policy implementation is vital. Existing laws should be reviewed to ensure they adequately protect women's political rights. Increasing transparency and public awareness of government policies supporting women in politics through targeted communication and outreach efforts would further enhance their participation and representation.

Ethical Clearance

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood their involvement was voluntary, for academic purposes, and that their rights and privacy were protected.

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The study was not funded

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest

Authors' Contributions

Inalegwu Emmanuel Udoh, conceived the study, including the design, and collection of the data, Sadicamin Oboh, Udoh Patience Oiwo, and Bolouboye Micah Eradiri analysed and interpreted the data, while Amaka Peace Onebunne and Imade Nelson Nosakhare wrote the initial manuscript. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript for publication in its current form.

Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.



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