

## The Challenges of Women Participation in Political Leadership and its Impact on Socioeconomic Development in Delta State

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### ABSTRACT

Women in Delta State have remained underrepresented in elected and party leadership roles despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments to gender equality. By 2024 no woman had served as governor or senator in Delta State, and women held only 12.1% of local council seats. These figures contrasted sharply with legal provisions, including Nigeria's adherence to the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and the Maputo Protocol. This paper therefore addressed a serious gap by moving beyond national aggregates to focusing on state-level dynamics on women political participation in leadership and its impact on development in Delta State. Drawing on liberal feminist theories, the paper examined the extent of women's engagement in electoral and party politics, the impact of that engagement on perceptions of leadership and its outcomes for development. In doing so, the study provided both empirical documentation through indepth interviews and theoretical refinement that has received little focus from previous scholarly works. This paper showed that women's participation in leadership was uniformly low across all dimensions of political engagement in Delta State. It was found that where women did engage in leadership, they tend to be more responsive to community needs and more attentive to vulnerable groups. It was argued that prevailing gender norms, party gatekeeping, financial constraints, election-related intimidation and weak mentorship networks are barriers to women's participation in political leadership in Delta State. This paper therefore suggested coordinated reforms in political parties' candidates' selection, campaign financing, election security and mentorship programmes to transform women's political participation.

### INTRODUCTION

Nigerian women continue to be remarkably under-represented in politics, despite formal commitments to gender equality. Globally, the foundation for gender equality in public life was established by documents like the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In 1985, Nigeria ratified CEDAW, which requires all member states to eliminate discrimination against women in public and political spheres. The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) marked a turning point when the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action called for state parties to implement affirmative action policies to ensure equitable participation and recognised women's political under-representation as a major worldwide issue (UN Women, 1995; UN Women, 2020). Equal participation of women in governance is demanded at the continental level by the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (also known as the Maputo Protocol, 2003). Despite having signed both, Nigeria has not kept up with the implementation of these obligations (African Union, 2003; African Union Commission, 2015).

Nigeria's National Gender Policy (NGP), which was updated in 2021, was established domestically in 2006 and set a 35% affirmative action goal for women in public office and political positions. Despite the fact that this policy framework conveys

intent, political gatekeeping, cultural norms, and structural institutional shortcomings have continuously weakened its implementation. The Nigerian government has not completely implemented its obligations, even though court orders have mandated compliance (Agora Policy, 2023).

Nigeria, which ranked 184th out of 192 countries in 2022, has one of the lowest rates of female political representation in the world (Akerele & Idowu, 2024). Women had just 3.9% of the seats in the combined National Assembly as of early 2024. Just 17 out of 469 federal legislators (3.6%) were female in the general elections of 2023, for instance—nearly the same number as the 18 female members of the 9th Assembly (2019–2023) (ThisDay, 2023). Furthermore, women only secured 72 out of 1,534 open positions (4.7%) in the 2023 elections (Agora Policy, 2023). Nigeria has yet to elect a female governor, president, or vice president, further distorting the executive landscape. Of the 36 deputy governors in office now, just three are female. These figures highlight the persistent gender disparity in Nigerian politics. Given that women make up around half of the population, the on-going disparity between population representation and political office holdings has been described as a "serious impediment to human development" and a reflection of deeply ingrained patriarchal domination. The Federal High Court, citing fairness and constitutional obligation, decided in 2022 that the federal government must uphold its 35% pledge for women in political appointments.

However, there hasn't been much real implementation. Women in Nigeria are still facing political marginalisation with little representation at all governmental levels. The issues are complex and systematic, encompassing everything from resource asymmetries and cultural bias to party-level exclusions and lax quota enforcement (Adebayo and Olutayo, 2024). Political parties have mostly failed to institutionalise gender-equity systems, notwithstanding their rhetoric about inclusivity.

In the history of democratic governance in Delta State there has never been a female governor or senator, despite comparatively high levels of literacy and urbanisation among women in the state. Marilyn Okowa-Daramola became the first female member of the State House of Assembly in 2023, and the only other woman in the House of Representatives is Hon. Erhiatake Ibori-Suenu. Similar trends are seen in local councils, where women make up only 12% of councillorship positions, which is about average for the country (Arimobi, 2025). This discrepancy is attributed by scholars to several interconnected hurdles. Women are still marginalised by patriarchal standards, limited financial resources, political gatekeeping, and cultural stereotypes. According to Ibrahim (2025), party leaders frequently view female candidates as unimportant, even pointing to their refusal to pay the nomination fee as proof of their insincerity rather than dedication. Male supremacy is further cemented by party ticket monopolies, campaign expenses, and cultural conservatism. Only 1,544 (10.1%) of the 15,269 candidates in the 2023 elections were female, and their attrition rate between the primaries and elections was far greater than that of male candidates (Nkereuwem, 2023).

This trend has not been reversed by policy engineering. Majority of political parties do not implement quotas or provide women with substantial campaign support, despite the existence of gender affirmative policies like the National Gender Policy and affirmative action clauses. Proposals for gender equity were approved in the 2014 National Conference; however, execution has been difficult. The statement "fee waivers have not translated to increased success at the polls" (Nkereuwem, 2023). Instead of implementing significant structural changes, the state's policy response is still primarily restricted to empowerment initiatives. There is still a disconnect between intention and actuality. Women are frequently included in government programs as recipients rather than as decision-makers or leaders. Therefore, rather than addressing exclusion, development initiatives that do not incorporate women's perspectives into policy formulation run the risk of sustaining it.

In the end, academics and organisations concur that inclusive governance is essential. The development agenda is still biased and underoptimized if women are not actively involved in decision-making processes. Globally, where they have been permitted to participate, women have been drivers of socio-economic growth (Agora Policy, 2023). As a result, tackling women's political marginalisation is both a development necessity and a human rights concern. Therefore, this paper assessed how national-level gender disparities appear at the sub-national level, with focus on Delta State. It examined the difficulties women encounter and the socio-political systems that support their marginalisation, in addition to participation and representation rates.

In essence, the overall objective of this paper was to examine the dynamics of women's political participation and the challenges they faced in attaining leadership positions in Delta State, as well as to explore how these dynamics impacted governance quality and developmental outcomes in the state.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

All society members, regardless of gender, should have equal rights, obligations, and opportunities in all areas of life, such as political involvement, economic activity, education, and personal growth (United Nations, 2024). This is known as gender equality. It included both the actualization of equal results and opportunities for men and women as well as the official repeal of discriminatory laws and institutions (UN Women, 2020).

According to Kabeer (1999), women's empowerment was the process by which they gained more agency, resources, and the capacity to make important decisions regarding their own lives and the welfare of their communities. The phrase 'empowerment' encompasses things like social status enhancement, education, economic power, and political power. Empowerment is the increase in people's capacity to make strategic life decisions in a situation where this capacity was formerly not granted to them.

Women's power was a key component of political empowerment. But in this instance, their ability to participate in the decision-making process and influence the creation of public policies and governance results was what gave them the power (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010). Thus, women's empowerment and gender equality reinforced each other. Without the latter, the former was lacking, just as it would be if the latter were the sole requirement met. If just the former existed, the latter would still be missing because empowerment relied on the systematic and institutional support that gender equality provided.

Several international accords and frameworks described initiatives to empower women and advance gender equality, particularly around political involvement. The main human rights agreement enacted by the UN in 1979, which was solely focused on attaining gender equality, was the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In addition to forbidding discrimination against women in public and political life, the first article of CEDAW required contracting nations to take affirmative measures to ensure women's full access to government and the creation of public policy (United Nations, 1979). The most significant document in the history of the gender equality movement was the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It was created in 1995 during the Fourth World Conference on Women and included a thorough agenda for promoting women's empowerment and gender equality. For example, it called for equal representation of both sexes in political and governmental organisations and the removal of barriers preventing women from assuming decision-making positions (United Nations, 1995).

However, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were created in 2015, were as important for promoting women's empowerment and gender equality globally. The most unequivocal mention of women's empowerment and the realisation of their human rights was found in the fifth goal. It was especially concerned with empowering all women and girls and achieving gender equality. Furthermore, objective 5.5 underlined the significance of women's equality of opportunity, access to positions of power, and presence in decision-making roles (United Nations, 2015). These frameworks outlined the normative benchmarks and created the obligations of national governments, such as Nigeria, to go beyond merely implementing policies to carrying out reforms that ensured the participation of women in the political process. At the national level, Nigeria implemented various policies aimed at fostering gender equality and empowering women.

The National Gender Policy (NGP), initially introduced in 2006 and subsequently updated, promoted gender equity and provided a strategic framework for increasing women's participation in governance (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2006). The NGP planned a target of 35% affirmative action in all sectors, including those of political appointments and elective positions. Nigeria, on its part, was a party to CEDAW and incorporated some of its provisions into national legislation, as well as judicial decisions (Igbuzor, 2019). Additionally, the SDGs of Nigeria emphasised the importance of achieving gender-balanced governance. But as numerous studies and pieces of data demonstrated, there were still significant differences between the legally binding agreements and the actual results (British Council, 2012).

Nigeria's national and state legislatures still had among the fewest female representatives in the world, and the country's affirmative action goals for women were not consistently met (UN Women, 2020). The attempts made to achieve gender equity in political leadership were just beginning to take shape in Delta State, and the lack of seriousness with which these concerns were addressed was evident. Bridging such a gap demanded legal changes as well as a societal transformation, and changing the ways institutions worked, the power structures that were reinforced by the attitudes toward gender and gender inequalities (Blessing & Fred, 2022). Supporting women's equal participation in politics was of utmost importance, not only for achieving gender equality but also for enhancing the quality of governance and promoting inclusive development.

The goals of development, which were a complex process, were to improve economic, social, and political systems as well as human well-being and quality of life. Economic growth, as determined by metrics like GDP, was the strict definition of development in the past. Today's criteria, however, give more weight to aspects of good governance, equality, sustainability, and broader human skills (UNDP, 2023). The UNDP defined development as the increase of people's freedoms and choices that allow them to live long, healthy, and satisfying lives (UNDP, 2023). Similarly, the World Bank (2022) defined development as a process by which societies transform to create inclusive, resilient, and sustainable prosperity. This multifaceted viewpoint highlighted that development must consider social, political, cultural, and environmental factors in addition to economic ones.

In an influential book, *Development as Freedom*, Sen (1999) argued that development should be seen as the improvement of substantive freedoms, such as political freedoms, social opportunities, transparency and protective security, which empower people to live the lives they desire. This framework highlighted that political participation and governance quality were integral to development. The goals of the economic side of development were to reduce poverty, create jobs, and create inclusive and sustainable economic growth (Singh et al, 2022). However, if economic expansion did not result in greater social justice and human well-being, it was insufficient in and of itself.

Equal opportunities for women, social security, health care, and high-quality education were all part of the social dimension of progress. To build cohesive and resilient societies, the UN (2023) emphasised the importance of social inclusion and the empowerment of underprivileged populations. Creating inclusive, responsible, and transparent governance systems was a key component of the political dimension of development. Fair development processes that were sensitive to the demands of society were founded on the fundamental tenets of democratic governance, such as the rule of law, respect for human rights, and public engagement (UNDP, 2023). It was frequently believed that inclusive leadership was the primary force behind sustainable

development. In order to achieve development goals, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development placed a strong emphasis on inclusive institutions, gender-responsive governance, and participatory decision-making (United Nations, 2015).

The legitimacy of public institutions, policy responsiveness, and governance quality were all improved by inclusive leadership, which was characterized by diversity in decision-making bodies and the meaningful engagement of women and other marginalized groups, according to empirical studies (OECD, 2020). More investments in human development, greater attention to social welfare, and more equitable policy outcomes were all facilitated by inclusive leadership (World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, nations with higher levels of gender parity in political leadership tended to perform better across various human development metrics, according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023 (World Economic Forum, 2023). Thus, inclusive leadership enhanced the efficacy and durability of development processes in addition to promoting gender justice. One of the primary drivers of inclusive growth was women increased political engagement. Studies continually demonstrated that policy objectives changed toward social protection, healthcare, education, and gender equity when women were meaningfully included in political leadership (UN Women, 2023).

According to O'Brien and Rickne (2022), female leaders were more likely to adopt inclusive and collaborative leadership styles that promoted consensus-building and responsiveness to diverse social needs. Additionally, the legitimacy and accountability of democratic institutions were improved when more women participated in political decision-making (Krook & Norris, 2014). It promoted a more equal allocation of power and resources and questioned patriarchal conventions. Since achieving gender parity in leadership was crucial to promoting peace, prosperity, and sustainability, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) linked gender equality (SDG 5) with broader development outcomes (United Nations, 2015). Promoting women's participation was both a normative requirement and a calculated method to improve development outcomes in areas like Nigeria and Delta State, where they were still notably underrepresented in political leadership.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the oldest and most significant schools of feminist thought is liberal feminism. It started in the 18th and 19th centuries with classical liberal intellectuals such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, who campaigned for women's rights based on the concepts of equality, liberty, and individual merit. Liberal feminism's main tenet is that women ought to have equal access to political, economic, and educational opportunities, and that any institutional or legal restrictions on this equality must be removed through reformist actions.

Liberal feminists emphasize the importance of individual rights, formal equality under the law and the capacity of women to compete and thrive in public life if given the same opportunities as men. They focus on legal and policy reforms aimed at levelling the playing field, such as anti-discrimination laws, affirmative action, and equal representation in politics and leadership. This approach does not seek to overturn existing democratic or capitalist institutions, but rather to ensure that women are not excluded from them. The enduring under-representation of women in political leadership and governance in Nigeria can be examined through the lens of liberal feminism. Nigeria's political system is still overwhelmingly biased in favour of men, despite the country's Constitution and several policies acknowledging gender equality. For instance, women's participation in political and decision-making roles is supposed to reach 35 percent, as stated in the National Gender Policy (2006, updated 2021), although this goal has never been met. Nigeria is among the least represented nations in the world for female political representation, with women holding only 4.7% of the seats in the National Assembly as of 2023 (ElectHER, 2023).

Liberal feminism helps explain this gap between formal guarantees and actual outcomes by pointing to systemic discrimination, cultural stereotypes and institutional inertia. While women in Nigeria have the legal right to vote and run for office, structural barriers such as lack of access to campaign funding, male-dominated party systems and sociocultural norms limit their political advancement. These are precisely the kinds of barriers that liberal feminists argue can be removed through legal reform, policy enforcement, and social awareness campaigns. Quotas and affirmative action policies are central to liberal feminist strategies for remedying gender imbalance. In Nigeria, the repeated failure to pass gender parity bills, including the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill, demonstrates the resistance to liberal feminist goals in the political arena. However, the continued advocacy for such measures by civil society and women's groups reflects the liberal feminist commitment to incremental, rights-based change. These debates also intersect with global frameworks like Sustainable Development Goal 5, which calls for the full and effective participation of women in political and public life (United Nations, 2015).

Liberal feminism is thus highly relevant to understanding and addressing the exclusion of women in Delta State politics. The theory supports policy-based interventions like gender quotas, party reform and legal enforcement mechanisms to enhance women's political inclusion. Its focus on equal opportunity and rights under law aligns with Nigeria's constitutional provisions and the aspirations of the National Gender Policy. Importantly, liberal feminism frames women's political participation not just as a moral or symbolic issue, but as a fundamental matter of justice and democratic legitimacy.

## Women participation in electoral processes and political leadership roles in Delta State

Nationally, the proportion of women in elective office has remained below 10 percent for more than a decade (Arowolo & Aluko, 2010). For Delta State, the indepth interviews provided background to systemic marginalization of women in political contests for

leadership. Several women who had attempted to register for primaries reported being discouraged by party agents questioning their “electability.”

One former aspirant in Aniocha North described:

I tried to register for the primaries, but party agents questioned my electability. One even told me, ‘women cannot win here,’ which showed the gender bias in how voters are perceived.

Such anecdotal evidence aligned with the view that cultural norms and party gatekeeping jointly suppress women’s willingness to stand for election (Okeke-Ihejirika & Franceschet, 2002). Ogunbodede (2023) reported that party elites frequently offered token gestures, such as nominally reduced nomination fees, instead of substantive campaign backing, leaving women without the financial or logistical support needed to mount effective campaigns. In Delta State, several female party members noted that while women’s wings received occasional training sessions, core campaign funds and adverts were channelled primarily to male aspirants. Such practices reinforce the gendered allocation of party resources and signal to voters that female candidacy remains secondary.

Yoon (2016) reported that where there are parties institutionalized dedicated slots and budgets for women support levels often exceeds 50 percent. This suggests that formal gender policies alone are insufficient; enforcement and budgetary commitments are crucial. In Delta State, party-level support for women remained limited despite any nominal policy pronouncements. Those interviewed provided more insights into these.

A female aspirant from Aniocha South said:

When I declared for the primaries, party officials encouraged me verbally but gave no funds, no posters, no media coverage. All the real campaign resources went to the male contenders.

A political party official from Uwwie explained:

We organise events for the women’s wing and sometimes waive nomination fees, but when it comes to funding and adverts, the budget is usually reserved for candidates we think can win and those are almost always men.

A civil society leader in Warri South revealed:

Parties talk about supporting women, but the structures don’t back it up. Without a dedicated budget line for female candidates, these promises stay on paper and women are left to campaign on their own resources.

Even though women were often visible in campaign events, a majority were perceived as marginalized in pre-election processes. Stakeholder Democracy Network (2020) found similar patterns in neighbouring states, where women often had access to multiparty forums but were excluded from high-profile debates and decision-making meetings. In Delta State, focus-group participants commented that male candidates dominated radio debates and that women’s speaking slots were scheduled at less popular times. This dynamic aligned with Eagly and Carli’s (2007) concept of the “glass cliff,” whereby women were only given risky or low-visibility roles in leadership frameworks. In electoral campaigns, this may translate into women being assigned to peripheral events, which diminished their public profile and undermines their competitiveness.

Like in other states of the federation, perceptions of women’s leadership roles remained weak in Delta State. Studies of political party hierarchies in Nigeria have consistently shown that women occupy fewer than 10 percent of leadership positions in top decision-making organs, such as national working committees, screening panels, and executive boards. This trend of structural exclusion is evident across multiple geopolitical zones and is sustained through gendered party norms and elite dominance (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2022 and Centre for Social Justice, 2022).

Reacting, a former female aspirant in Udu Local Government said:

My title in the party is high-sounding, but I’m never invited to the real decision-making meetings. Those are for the men, we just get to organise the women’s wing.

A political party official from Warri North remarked:

We do have women in leadership, but they are mostly in welfare or women’s affairs roles. Strategic positions like chairman or secretary are traditionally given to men.

Civil society leader on women’s empowerment in Aniocha South said:

Until women are part of the screening and campaign committees, their presence in party leadership will remain symbolic rather than influential.

Tiainen (2018) indicated that even parties with gender quotas often relegated women to symbolic posts, limiting their influence on strategic decisions. Research in various Niger Delta communities consistently documented low levels of women’s participation in local governance processes, especially in town hall and community decision-making forums. For instance, SDN report (2020) showed that women were frequently absent from political consultations and had minimal voice even when present. Also, Sam and Zibima (2024) and Gbenemene and Masi (2019) both described the role of women as peripheral in conflict management and

community governance, often embedded within informal or non-decision-making roles. These findings confirmed that women's formal involvement in participatory decision-making was marginal-to-tokenistic across the surveyed communities.

The finding that women's participation was uniformly low across multiple dimensions of the electoral cycle had clear implications for theories of political leadership and gender equality. First, transformational leadership theory held that inclusive leaders foster greater engagement among followers (Bass and Riggio, 2006). However, the low level of active contesting, campaign involvement and leadership roles suggested that neither individual women nor party institutions were enacting the behaviours associated with transformational leadership. Women who did stand for office or lead rallies did not comprise a sufficiently large cohort to influence broader participation patterns. This failure of transformational leadership practices pointed to the need for deliberate capacity-building interventions that equip women with the skills to lead and mobilise support.

Although Nigeria's constitution and electoral laws guaranteed women the right to run for office, the uniform lack of perceived support across all five survey items indicated that these provisions had not translated into real gains. This lent support to the argument that liberal feminist prescriptions for electoral quotas and anti-discrimination rules needed stronger enforcement and sanctioning of non-compliant parties. This also aligns with Norris's (2004) observation that "token" female candidacies can reinforce stereotypes of women as exceptions rather than equals.

The interplay between formal enfranchisement and substantive participation shows that Nigerian law grants women the right to run and vote but legal provisions did not produce meaningful involvement. This lends empirical weight to the concept of "critical mass", the idea that without a threshold proportion of women in decision-making positions, legislative or party reforms remain symbolic (Krook, 2010). In Delta politics, the role of social perceptions in sustaining women exclusion is in clear manifestation. Public attitudes shape party recruitment and voter support. If most citizens doubt women's capacity or legitimacy as political actors, parties have little incentive to promote them, and women themselves may self-select out of competition. This vicious cycle has been documented in comparative studies of Sub-Saharan Africa (Bauer and Burnet, 2013) and appears to be active in Delta State as well. Other studies such as Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) reported that villages with women heads in India saw significantly higher allocations to water and sanitation projects, reflecting perceived attentiveness. Dim and Asomah (2019) used Afrobarometer data to demonstrate that communities with female local councillors in Ghana rated public services more positively. Delta State's positive rating fell within that range, suggesting that women's responsiveness is recognised across diverse African settings.

According to an indepth interview respondent and an official of Delta State Ministry of Health:

In my experience, women legislators come to the health centres, speak with the patients, and push for emergency supplies. But the problem is, they don't control the budget, so their hands are tied.

The interviewee further explained that women's proposals for clinic renovations or school repairs often stalled at the state assembly or stalled in ministry committees. The result was that, despite community engagement, downstream factors such as party patronage, bureaucratic delays, and limited appropriation undermined improvements in water, health, and education.

Regional studies in Nigeria have likewise found that female lawmakers champion social welfare but confront implementation barriers. For instance, although women senators have historically voted in favour of increased health sector funding, systemic deficiencies, such as bureaucratic inertia, patronage-based resource allocation, and federal-local disconnects, have hindered effective execution at the grassroots level (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023). In Delta State, policy impact rating among female-led initiatives suggests that advocacy does not always translate into operational outcomes, underscoring the structural disconnect between legislative ambition and executive delivery (Ogunbodede, 2023).

Similarly, Eagly and Karau (2002) reported that female executives scored higher on measures of collaboration and inclusion than their male counterparts. Evidence from South Africa indicates that women in parliamentary roles frequently leveraged their positions to expand citizen engagement, especially in rural areas. Geisler (2000) found that female legislators in KwaZulu-Natal were often more accessible to constituents and more likely to advocate for public hearings and service delivery oversight than their male colleagues. Delta State's positive rating by interviewees lay below those benchmarks, implying that although some women embraced participatory methods, this was not uniformly recognized by constituents.

Qualitative data shed further light.

A female party official in Udu explained:

We try to reach people through small discussions in churches and market associations, but we don't have fixed schedules or publicised town halls.  
That's why many don't even know these efforts are happening.

This informal approach contrasted with the structured committee meetings convened by male legislators, reinforcing perceptions that women's inclusive practices were ad hoc rather than institutionalised. Piscopo (2011) demonstrated that women legislators frequently championed social welfare and family policy issues, including education and health-related legislation

A female councilor from Warri South recounted:

We used part of our constituency allowance to fund mobile clinics that brought prenatal care to remote villages, but because it wasn't a road project, it didn't make the headlines.

Another female Councillor, Aniocha South LGA:

The media only seem to notice when a politician builds roads. Our health programmes save lives, but they don't get the same attention.

Norris (2004) argued that when women undertake small-scale projects, they often fail to attract media coverage or ceremonial launch events, reinforcing their status as symbolic actors. Similar patterns were observed in Ghana, where women's borehole projects were inaugurated without press notice (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). In Delta State, a Warri South journalist noted that only projects accompanied by plaques or ribbon-cutting ceremonies made headlines, and most women's initiatives fell below that threshold. The negative rating underscored the gap between effort and recognition. Without formal ceremonies or media engagement, women's developmental contributions remained invisible to many constituents, limiting the perceived value of their participation.

The findings also supported key ideas in liberal feminist theory, which holds that while formal legal rights are essential, they are not enough to achieve substantive equality (Krook & Zetterberg, 2022). Although Nigerian law guarantees women the right to hold political office, and the survey showed statistically significant associations between women's participation and certain positive leadership outcomes, the strength of those associations remained low. This indicated that legal recognition on its own could not overcome entrenched structural and cultural limitations. For instance, women's efforts in areas such as education and healthcare were acknowledged by just over half of respondents, yet these projects received limited media attention and funding. This gap reflected a core argument in liberal feminist thought: that without institutional support, such as earmarked funding or effective party-level gender quotas, formal equality is unlikely to translate into real influence or authority.

This outcome also highlighted the importance of linking women's descriptive representation, having women in office, with substantive representation, namely the policies and practices that reflect women's interests (Pitkin, 1967). Delta State's elected women were descriptively present but did not always achieve substantive outcomes in service delivery or public recognition. This gap underscored the need for research and practice to focus on mechanisms that strengthen women's capacity to shape agendas and secure resources, rather than solely on increasing the number of women officeholders.

Specifically, political followers are more likely to view female political leaders as responsive to community needs and as advocates for vulnerable populations. However, a smaller proportion believed that women in office significantly improved access to social services or achieved public recognition for their projects. These results suggested that while many constituents valued the presence of women in leadership, institutional limitations and societal norms continued to obscure or limit the visibility and impact of their contributions. The discussion situated these findings within the framework of transformational leadership and liberal feminist theory. The evidence supported the idea that women in politics often emphasize social welfare, participation, and responsiveness. At the same time, it highlighted that legal rights and electoral access alone do not ensure substantive influence or recognition. The absence of structural support, such as consistent media coverage, party backing, and formal access to public resources, continued to hinder the ability of women to translate leadership into large-scale development outcomes.

The significance of these findings lies not only in their confirmation of existing scholarship on gender and politics but also in the local specificity they provide. In the environment of Delta State, the study revealed both progress and persistent barriers. It showed that many citizens were aware of and appreciated women's contributions, yet systemic constraints limited the visibility and reach of those efforts. This mixed picture underscores the importance of developing targeted strategies that do not merely promote inclusion in numerical terms but also work to institutionalize support mechanisms that empower women in practical, enduring ways.

Feminist security literature emphasizes that women experience political violence not only through direct physical aggression but also through the climate of fear such incidents generate, which can significantly discourage political participation (Ugwu, 2024). In Nigeria's Niger Delta, which includes Delta State, multiple observer groups have documented that election-related intimidation, harassment, and obstruction constitute meaningful barriers to women's political engagement during the 2019 cycle. For instance, the Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN) and the Niger Delta Watch reported that political violence, often targeting opposition aspirants and civil society members, acted as a deterrent to both female candidates and voters, underscoring how pervasive intimidation shapes the electoral environment (Stakeholder Democracy Network, 2019).

Akiyode-Afolabi and Arogundade (2003) found that women in Nigeria often face coordinated intimidation tactics, including harassment by security personnel who perceive women's public roles as inappropriate. In Delta State, interviews confirmed that some female aspirants were refused access to official voter registration centres, while male counterparts proceeded unchallenged (Agbalajobi, 2015). This underscores how institutional agents sometimes collude in gendered exclusion.

The public perception of gender violence has broader implications. Beyond individual candidates, fear of harassment undermines women's willingness to serve as party agents, attend training workshops, or engage in grassroots mobilization. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle: as fewer women participate, political culture remains male dominated, and violence against women continues unchallenged. Empirical studies have long recognized the importance of mentorship in political careers. Beaman and Duflo (2004)

demonstrated in India that women who received mentorship from established leaders were significantly more likely to run for and win local office.

In the Nigerian setting, Women who benefitted from informal networks, often facilitated by elder female politicians or civil society organisations, were better prepared to navigate party primaries and campaign logistics (The Cable, 2025; Premium Times, 2024). The low level of agreement in Delta State suggested that few women had access to such guiding relationships. Interviews underscored this gap. Several female aspirants described entering politics without a mentor and relying on sporadic advice from acquaintances rather than structured guidance.

One female aspirant, Aniocha South explained:

I came into politics without anyone to guide me. The advice I got was from friends here and there, nothing structured, nothing strategic.

Another former Councillor, Udu noted:

I joined a women's political forum, but it was already late in the campaign season. By then, there was no time for proper mentoring or planning.

A party youth leader, Warri South maintained:

We have informal mentoring for some of the young male aspirants, but I can't recall any similar process for women. That's just how the network has always worked.

From the standpoint of social theory, political networks constitute a form of resource that facilitates information exchange, fundraising, and strategic alliances (Putnam, 2000). In Delta State, male candidates often drew on family ties or business associations for campaign support. By contrast, women's exclusion from these networks limited their access to critical resources and collective learning opportunities. This imbalance perpetuated cycles of underrepresentation, as women lacked both the formal credentials and the informal connections needed to mount competitive campaigns.

This finding aligned with liberal feminist critiques that formal inclusion, such as guaranteed eligibility to contest elections, does not ensure substantive access to the means of political competition (Tripp et al., 2009). In Delta State, the absence of structured mentorship programmes or support groups for women indicated that gender equality remained superficial within party systems. Without institutionalised mechanisms for guidance and networking, women were left to navigate complex political terrains on their own. Addressing this barrier requires deliberate action by parties and civil society. Formal mentorship schemes, pairing aspiring women with experienced legislators or party officials, have proven effective in settings such as Rwanda and Uganda (UN Africa, 2021; UNDP, 2018). In Delta State, establishing similar programmes within party structures or through non-governmental organisations could foster the development of women's political skills, confidence, and networks.

## CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrated a clear trajectory from uniformly low levels of women's electoral participation to modest perceptions of leadership effectiveness and finally to widely acknowledged structural barriers that limited their political advancement in Delta State. Fewer than half of respondents agreed that women actively contested elections, held party offices or engaged beyond voting. Where women did participate, they were viewed as responsive to community needs and champions of vulnerable groups, but they received limited recognition for service delivery or project visibility. These patterns showed that women's presence in politics remained marginal rather than concentrated in a single domain of success.

Liberal feminism helped explain why women's strengths in motivation, individualized care and social welfare advocacy did not translate into broader public impact. Despite evidence that female leaders inspired and mobilized certain community segments, institutional constraints prevented these qualities from reshaping party practices or media narratives. Liberal feminist theory further illuminated the gap between formal legal rights and substantive participation. Although constitutional guarantees and international agreements endorsed women's political rights, the lack of enforceable party quotas, targeted funding streams and protections against intimidation kept those rights largely symbolic.

Several limitations should inform future research. First, the cross-sectional survey captured perceptions at one point in time, leaving unanswered questions about how interventions such as quotas or financing reforms might shift attitudes across election cycles. Second, reliance on self-reported data introduced potential social desirability bias; integrating direct observation or archival analysis could validate the patterns observed here. Third, qualitative interviews provided depth but were limited in number and scope; broader ethnographic work could reveal how local power brokers shape women's access in different communities.

By synthesizing quantitative patterns with contextual interviews, this paper contributes new evidence on the interplay between participation, perceived effectiveness and entrenched barriers. It offers a roadmap for Delta State and similar regions to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward genuine empowerment. Addressing the combined challenges of party gatekeeping, financial exclusion, cultural norms and safety concerns will require coordinated action across political parties, electoral authorities and civil society. Only by aligning legal reform with practical support mechanisms can women's political representation shift from token presence to substantive leadership.

To achieve meaningful transformation in women political leadership in Delta State, this paper suggests the dismantling of multiple structural obstacles identified, enforceable gender quotas within party organs must be enacted alongside dedicated campaign finance mechanisms for women. Quotas of at least 30 percent in party executive committees and candidate lists, backed by sanctions for non-compliance, will counteract patriarchal gatekeeping. In parallel, establish a “Women’s Campaign Fund” to subsidize nomination fees and campaign expenses, and mandate rapid-response units within electoral bodies to investigate and sanction violence or intimidation against women aspirants.

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