

Women's Political Participation in Nigeria: A Study of Kebbi State, Nigeria 1999-2023

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Abstract

This study examines the extent, trends, and challenges of women's political participation in Kebbi State, Nigeria, from 1999 to 2023. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative interviews, official electoral records, and documentary analysis, the study is anchored in Liberal Feminist Theory, which explains how structural inequalities and discriminatory practices limit women's access to political opportunities. Findings reveal that since 1999, no woman has served as governor, deputy governor, senator, or member of the State House of Assembly. Only one woman has ever been elected to the House of Representatives, and no woman has been elected as a local government chairperson. These results expose the deep-rooted socio-cultural, religious, economic, and institutional barriers that inhibit women's political inclusion. The study concludes that despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments to gender equality, women in Kebbi State remain systematically marginalised in the political process. It recommends enforcing affirmative action policies, investing in girl-child education, empowering women economically, reforming political parties, sensitising communities to challenge harmful norms, and capacity-building programs to support aspiring female politicians. Addressing these barriers is critical for achieving inclusive governance, gender equity, and democratic development in Kebbi State.

Keywords: Women, Political Participation, Gender Equality, Kebbi State, Nigeria, Electoral Representation, Governance

Introduction

Political participation is a fundamental indicator of democratic governance and encompasses the activities through which citizens influence the selection of political leaders and the formulation of public policy. In every democratic society, the participation of all groups in the political process is essential to ensure inclusive governance and balanced development. The principles of equity and democratic legitimacy demand that all segments of society, including women, have equitable access to power and representation. Political participation encompasses not only the right to vote and contest elections but also the ability to influence decision-making processes and policy implementation at all levels of government.

Globally, gender equality in political leadership has been recognised as a cornerstone of sustainable development, as articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which emphasises the need to ensure women's full and effective participation at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life (Kelly, 2019). Despite this international consensus, women continue to face systemic barriers to political inclusion in many parts of the world, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where patriarchal systems, limited access to resources, and cultural norms continue to inhibit their political aspirations (Ette, 2017).

Nowadays, across the globe, significant strides have been made to close the gender gap in politics. Countries such as Rwanda, Namibia, and Senegal have achieved female representation

in parliaments above 40%, aided by deliberate legal reforms, gender quotas, and effective political mobilisation (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2022). However, in Nigeria, women's political representation has remained consistently poor since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999. While democracy ideally promotes inclusivity, Nigeria's political landscape has remained male-dominated, reflecting a legacy of colonial structures, entrenched patriarchal norms, weak institutional mechanisms for gender equality, and the absence of enforceable gender quotas (Orji, Orji, & Agbanyim, 2018)

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, several initiatives and policy declarations have aimed to increase women's political participation. These include the National Gender Policy (2006), the 35% Affirmative Action policy, and Nigeria's ratification of international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). However, the implementation of these policies has been inconsistent and often symbolic. As a result, the representation of women in political offices has remained significantly low, with women rarely attaining elective positions, especially in conservative regions like Kebbi State.

The statistics illustrate the gravity of the issue. In the 1999 general elections, women occupied only 3.1% of seats in the National Assembly. This marginal increase to just 7.2% in 2007 and a decline to 6.4% in 2019 indicate that progress has not been consistent or meaningful (INEC, 2019; Ajayi, 2019; IPU, 2022). In 2023, of the 1,553 women who contested various elective positions, only 75 emerged victorious, representing just about 4.8% of total elected officials nationwide (Premium Times, 2023). Notably, Nigeria ranks among the lowest in the world for female representation in parliament, placing 181st out of 190 countries globally (IPU, 2022). This is particularly concerning given Nigeria's size, population, and regional influence.

The democratic dispensation (1999-2023) provides a strategic timeframe to evaluate shifts in women's political participation in Kebbi State, particularly as it coincides with increased global and national advocacy for gender equality. Within this period, multiple electoral cycles have taken place (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023), providing a basis to analyse trends, patterns, and setbacks in women's political inclusion in the state.

The paucity of research focused specifically on Kebbi State creates a significant knowledge gap. Most empirical studies on women's political participation in Nigeria tend to concentrate on the southern regions or on national-level data. This underrepresentation in academic literature mirrors the political exclusion of women in northern Nigeria and underscores the urgency of region-specific research that could inform targeted policy responses.

In light of the above, this study seeks to critically examine the extent, trends, and challenges of women's political participation in Kebbi State from 1999 to 2023. It aims to analyse both structural and contextual factors that impede women's inclusion in politics and to provide evidence-based recommendations to improve gender equity in the state's political landscape.

Literature Review

Concept of Political Participation

According to Kelly (2019), political participation encompasses a variety of actions that citizens undertake to influence political outcomes. These include activities such as casting votes during elections, contesting for public office, affiliating with political parties, holding leadership roles, and contributing to or engaging in political campaigns, all aimed at advancing individual or collective interests.

Political participation also refers to the intentional actions ordinary individuals take to influence political outcomes within a society. As Brady (1999) explains, such participation involves visible, voluntary efforts by citizens, excluding political elites and government officials, aimed at shaping political decisions. This concept encompasses all non-compulsory acts by members of the public intended to influence political choices, whether directly or indirectly, across different levels of the political system (Kaase & Marsh, 1979). To achieve meaningful political participation, elections must be competitive and conducted in a free, fair, and credible manner. Such processes require the engagement of various stakeholders, including individuals of all genders and opposition political groups (Olajubu, 2022).

Before Nigeria attained independence, voting rights were highly restricted, with the colonial administration tying suffrage to specific income levels. However, following independence, the right to vote became more inclusive, extending to individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, provided they met the age criterion. Still, participation in politics extends far beyond just voting.

Women and Political Participation in Nigeria

Women's participation in political and electoral processes is a critical indicator of a functional and mature democracy. Historically, during the pre-colonial period, although cultural values were upheld, societal structures reflected significant gender inequalities. Women were often marginalised due to entrenched traditional and customary practices that placed men in dominant societal roles (Ojo, 2022). Despite these limitations, women were not passive members of society; they played significant roles in community leadership and governance long before the advent of Islam and colonialism. Notable historical figures such as Moremi of Ile-Ife, Queen Idia and Emotan of Benin, and Queen Amina of Zaria exemplify this (Ngwu et al., 2022).

With the advent of colonialism, the status of women further declined as colonial policies disrupted existing social structures and reinforced patriarchal norms. The colonial administration often viewed women as subordinate, undermining their contributions and limiting their participation in public life (Adenuga, 2022). However, this exclusion prompted the emergence of various women-led organisations, such as the Lagos Market Women's Association (LMWA) in the 1920s, the Nigerian Women's Party (NWP) in 1944, the Women's Movement in Nigeria (WMN) in 1952, the Federation of Nigerian Women Societies (FNWS) in 1953, and the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS) in 1959. These groups were formed to challenge gender-based discrimination and advocate for greater political inclusion (Orisadare, 2019).

Prominent female activists like Mrs Charlotte Obasa, Mrs Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Mrs Margaret Ekpo, Mrs Janet Moku, and Hajiya Sawaba Gambo were instrumental in galvanising support for women's rights and political participation. Despite their efforts, women were sidelined within political party structures and wielded minimal influence in the political landscape of the time (Oloyede, 2016).

The post-colonial period marked a gradual shift as Nigerian women began to assert their right to participate in political and decision-making processes. The extension of voting rights to women in some regions encouraged increased involvement, though challenges persisted. The 1979 Constitution was a significant milestone, as it formally recognised the political rights of women and outlawed gender discrimination. Nonetheless, deeply rooted socio-cultural norms and the lingering effects of colonialism continued to hinder progress (Rojas, 1994). Key female figures in this era included Mrs Wuraola Esan in the Western Region, Mrs Margaret Ekpo and

Mrs Janet Mokelu in the Eastern Region, and others such as Mrs Janet Akinmade, Mrs Nike Oyagbola, Alhaja Latifat Okunu, Mrs Pamela Saduki, Mrs Cecilia Ekpenyong, Mrs Onikepo Akande, and Dr Laraba Gambo Abdullahi, who served as Minister of Women Affairs in 1998 (Suleiman, 2017).

The active engagement of citizens, irrespective of gender, in national development is essential for fostering social responsibility and inclusion. Societal development thrives when both men and women have equal opportunities to participate in governance and public affairs (Ajayi, 2019).

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, there has been an observable increase in women's political participation. However, the gender gap remains substantial. Despite progress, women still face significant barriers to achieving parity with men in politics. Contemporary statistics and data highlight these disparities, reinforcing the need to advocate for gender equality in political representation. In line with international standards, both genders must be granted equal rights and opportunities in political and decision-making processes. Promoting women's political participation remains a central goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those focusing on gender equality.

Factors that Hinder Women's Political Participation in Nigeria

Women's political participation in Nigeria has remained consistently low despite various national and international efforts to promote gender equality. Scholars have consistently observed that women are underrepresented in the country's political sphere, which contradicts both democratic ideals and Nigeria's obligations under instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Awodipe, 2022). Although women make up nearly 50% of the Nigerian population, their representation in political offices, particularly in legislative and executive positions, has remained below 10% in recent election cycles (INEC, 2019; UN Women, 2021). This persistent underrepresentation has drawn the attention of researchers seeking to understand the barriers to women's involvement in political leadership.

A key strand of literature attributes the low level of participation to historical and institutional exclusion. Ette and Patience (2022) argue that colonialism introduced and institutionalised male-dominated governance systems, replacing indigenous political structures in which women held significant power. This colonial legacy entrenched patriarchal systems that have continued into the post-colonial era, effectively sidelining women from the political process. Post-independence, political participation remained male-dominated, and even during the transition to civilian rule in 1999, women were rarely positioned for winnable seats or influential appointments (Ngwu et al., 2022).

The role of political parties has also come under scrutiny. Orisadare (2019) contends that party structures in Nigeria are inherently patriarchal and hierarchical, making it difficult for women to emerge as candidates, particularly in major political parties. While many parties include women's wings and claim to support gender inclusion, these units are often relegated to support roles with little influence on candidate selection or party decision-making (Suleiman, 2017). Intra-party politics is also marked by financial gatekeeping and patronage, which women often find challenging to navigate due to limited access to political capital and campaign funding (Okeke-Ihejirika & Franceschet, 2002). Given the monetisation of Nigerian politics, the inability to compete financially with male counterparts often limits women's visibility and competitiveness in elections.

Another major factor is the socio-cultural environment that influences political behaviour in Nigeria. Scholars such as Iloka (2021) and Suleiman (2017) observe that gender stereotypes and cultural norms continue to portray women as caregivers rather than decision-makers, thereby discouraging female political aspiration. In many communities, political leadership is seen as the exclusive preserve of men, and women who seek elective office are often labelled as deviant or morally suspect. These cultural norms are further reinforced by religious interpretations, especially in northern Nigeria, where certain Islamic ideologies are invoked to justify women's limited participation in public affairs (Oloyede, 2016). While these cultural constraints are not uniform across the country, they are sufficiently widespread to influence both women's self-perception and voter preferences.

Legislative and policy-based attempts to improve women's political participation have met with limited success. Nigeria's National Gender Policy (2006) recommends a minimum of 35% representation for women in all sectors, including politics, but this has remained largely unimplemented. Efforts to pass the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill, which aims to enforce affirmative action and eliminate discrimination, have repeatedly stalled in the National Assembly due to political and religious opposition (Iloka, 2021). This failure to institutionalise gender quotas or legally enforce inclusive practices undermines the ability of women to compete on a level playing field. Although Nigeria is a signatory to various regional and international conventions that advocate gender equity, the domestic legal framework remains weak and ineffective in promoting women's political rights (UN Women, 2021).

Empirical studies have shown that even where women have managed to occupy political positions, they are often limited to less influential roles or appointed rather than elected positions. For instance, in the 2019 general elections, only 62 women were elected out of 1,558 contested seats, representing a mere 4.0% of elected officials nationwide (INEC, 2019; Kelly, 2019; Ajayi, 2019; Ngwu et al., 2022). These figures highlight the persistent gender gap in political representation, which remains one of the lowest globally. While civil society organisations have attempted to bridge this gap through advocacy, capacity-building, and voter education campaigns, their efforts have yet to yield transformative results (Ajayi, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The Liberal Feminist Theory.

Liberal feminist theory provides a foundational framework for understanding the structural and institutional dynamics that limit women's participation in political processes, particularly in a developing country like Nigeria, where democratic institutions are often gender-exclusive. Emerging from the classical liberal tradition, liberal feminism is rooted in the works of scholars like Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and later Betty Friedan, who collectively argued for the recognition of women as rational, autonomous individuals entitled to the same rights and opportunities as men in all spheres of public life, including politics (Tong, 2009; Bryson, 2016). The central thesis of the liberal feminist tradition is that women's subordination is primarily a result of legal inequalities, social customs, and institutional discrimination rather than inherent incapacity. The theory, therefore, emphasises reformist strategies aimed at dismantling legal and institutional barriers that hinder women's equal access to political, economic, and social opportunities. This perspective is instrumental in analysing political participation in democratic states like Nigeria, where formal political rights are granted to all citizens. However, structural and informal barriers continue to marginalise women.

In the Nigerian political environment, liberal feminism offers explanatory value in understanding the gap between constitutional provisions for gender equality and the political

realities women experience. Section 42 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees protection against discrimination based on sex, and the country has ratified numerous international conventions promoting gender equality, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the African Union's Maputo Protocol (Kelly, 2019). In addition, the National Gender Policy (2006) recommends a minimum 35% affirmative action for women's representation in decision-making positions. However, liberal feminist theorists would argue that despite these formal guarantees, the Nigerian political space remains deeply exclusionary due to weak institutional enforcement, patriarchal dominance in party politics, and a political culture that reinforces male hegemony. For example, women constituted only 6.7% of candidates in the 2019 general elections and held less than 5% of elected positions, revealing the failure of legal equality to translate into practical representation (INEC, 2019; UN Women, 2021).

A core concern of liberal feminism is that equality in access to political participation can only be achieved through the deliberate dismantling of structural barriers, many of which are sustained by discriminatory practices within political parties, campaign financing, and media representation. Political parties in Nigeria rarely nominate women for competitive positions, and party nomination fees are often prohibitively high, effectively excluding many women from contesting (Oloyede, 2016). Furthermore, the male-dominated nature of political godfatherism in Nigeria means that women are often sidelined in political bargaining and decision-making. Liberal feminism, in this regard, would advocate policy interventions such as enforceable gender quotas, reform of internal party structures, subsidised nomination fees for female candidates, and enhanced access to political education and capacity-building for women.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine women's political participation in Kebbi State from 1999 to 2023. The population comprised all elected and appointed political office holders, alongside key community stakeholders relevant to women's political engagement. A total of 20 respondents (women leaders, party officials, civil society actors, and community members) were purposively selected for interviews and observations. Primary data were obtained through oral interviews and field observations, while secondary data were sourced from INEC records, media reports, and official documents. Quantitative data were summarised using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data were analysed thematically.

Study Area

Kebbi State is located in northwestern Nigeria between latitudes 10°N and 13°N and longitudes 3°30'E and 6°00'E. Created in 1991, the state has 21 Local Government Areas with Birnin Kebbi as the capital. Administratively, Kebbi is divided into three senatorial districts, namely: Kebbi North, Kebbi Central, and Kebbi South, and has eight Federal Constituencies, each represented by a member of the House of Representatives. The major ethnic groups include Hausa, Dakarkari, Kambari, and Zabarmawa. The state's population is mainly agrarian, with residents engaged in farming, fishing, and small-scale commerce. Kebbi's cultural conservatism and low female representation make it a relevant setting for examining women's political participation.

Results

Women and the Gubernatorial Seat in Kebbi State

The findings of the study revealed that all the governors since its creation have been men (100%; n=10), four (4) of whom were military administrators, one Acting Governor, and five (5) civilian Governors. The findings also showed that the percentage of women in both the military and the civilian government cabinet is too meager. The relegated position of women in state governance persisted, as the current governorship candidates for all parties that won primary elections for the 2023 general election were men. The study also revealed that no woman has ever been a deputy governor in Kebbi State.

Table 1: Women and Senate Seats in Kebbi State

Senatorial District	2023	2019	2015	2011	2007	2003	1999
Kebbi North	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Kebbi Central	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Kebbi South	M	M	M	M	M	M	M

Source: INEC (2023)

The findings of this study revealed that since 1999, no woman has been elected to the Senate seat in Kebbi State; all have been males. Although no woman has ever won a Senate seat in Kebbi State, INEC records show that women have contested, for example, in 2019, Mohammed Shafaatu and Sanni Aishatu contested for the Kebbi North senatorial seat, while Abubakar Hajara B. Kebbi contested in Kebbi Central. However, all lost to male candidates due to low party support, limited campaign resources, and strong socio-cultural constraints.

Table 2: Women and House of Representatives Seats in Kebbi State

Constituency	2023	2019	2015	2011	2007	2003	1999
Arewa / Dandi	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Argungu / Augie	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Bagudo / Suru	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Bunza / Birnin Kebbi / Kalgo	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Aleiro / Gwandu / Jega	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Koko-Besse / Maiyama	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Fakai / Sakaba / Wasagu / Danko / Zuru	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Ngaski/Shanga/Yauri	M	M	M	M	F	M	M

Source: INEC (2023)

The findings of this study revealed that, since 1999, only one woman, Hon. Halima Hassan Tukur, who represented Yauri/Sanga/Ngaski Federal Constituency under the platform of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) from 2007 to 2011, had been elected to the House of Representatives in Kebbi State. She served only for one term. After completing her term in 2011, Hon. Halima Hassan Tukur sought to return to the House of Representatives but lost out during the PDP primary election. This dispute later became the subject of litigation. She did not appear on the ballot for the 2011 general election, and the seat was subsequently won by Garba Umar Uba, who represented the constituency from 2011 to 2015. Since then, she has not contested again.

Table 3: Women and House of Assembly Seats in Kebbi State

State Constituency	2023	2019	2015	2011	2007	2003	1999
Yauri	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Jega	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Wasagu-Danko I	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Koko/Besse	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Sakaba	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Wasagu-Danko II	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Fakai	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Dandi	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Kalgo	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Gwandu	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Maiyama	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Suru	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Shanga	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Ngaski	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Aleiro	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Birnin Kebbi I	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Arewa-Dandi	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Bunza	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Bagudo I	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Argungu	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Bagudo II	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Augie	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Birnin Kebbi II	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Zuru	M	M	M	M	M	M	M

Source: INEC (2023)

The study found that Kebbi State has not elected a single female member to its State House of Assembly since 1999. The Assembly has been composed exclusively of men, with no female representation.

Women and Local Government Chairperson's Seat in Kebbi State

The findings of this study further revealed that no woman has been elected as a Local Government Area (LGA) Chairperson in Kebbi State since 1999. However, Hon. Hindatu Umar served as the appointed Sole Administrator (caretaker Chairperson) of Argungu LGA in 2016 at age 25—but she was not elected to that position.

Factors that Hinder Women's Political Participation in Kebbi State

A respondent said that:

Religion does not permit women to come to public, lead when men are around, her voice is sexual and hence should be heard by her husband only. If women join politics, they will mingle with men, and that is against our culture and religion.

Another respondent expressed that:

If a woman takes on a mantle of leadership, she no longer respects her husband. This will eventually lead to divorce.

A female respondent further asserted that:

Check the entire state's political involvement since 1999, and you will realise that women are nowhere to be found. This is because women have lower school enrolment, harmful cultural practices, and policies that ensure male domination.

Strategies for Addressing the Low Political Participation of Women in Kebbi State

For women to fully participate in politics in Kebbi State, the following should be implemented:

1. More enrolment of women in schools, especially at the higher level of education
2. Women should have access to business ventures
3. Access to Loans
4. There should be decisive awareness and encouragement of women into politics
5. Percentage of legislative and executive seats should be reserved for women
6. Women should be encouraged to support women

Discussion of Findings

The study's findings clearly demonstrate that women's political participation in Kebbi State between 1999 and 2023 remains critically low at all levels of governance. Despite over two decades of democratic rule and various national and international frameworks advocating gender inclusion, women in Kebbi State have been largely excluded from elective political positions. The study revealed that since the return to democracy in 1999, no woman has ever held the position of governor, deputy governor, senator, or state house of assembly member in Kebbi State. The only recorded female political office holder was Hon. Halima Hassan Tukur, who served a single term in the House of Representatives from 2007 to 2011. Even at the local government level, no woman has been elected as chairperson, with only one woman (Hon. Hindatu Umar) appointed as sole administrator in 2016.

These findings highlight the entrenched structural, socio-cultural, and religious barriers limiting women's political visibility and participation. Factors such as limited educational attainment among women, patriarchal norms, financial exclusion, and harmful religious interpretations were found to contribute to their marginalisation. Respondents cited beliefs that discourage women from public leadership roles, associating such ambitions with immorality or rebellion against male authority. The complete absence of female candidates from the 2023 governorship race in the state further confirms the deep-rooted gender disparities.

Conclusion

This study concludes that women's political participation in Kebbi State from 1999 to 2023 has been minimal, with little to no representation in elective positions across all levels of governance. Despite Nigeria's constitutional guarantees, international commitments, and various gender-related policies, women in Kebbi State remain marginalised in the political arena due to a combination of cultural, religious, socio-economic, and institutional barriers. The dominance of patriarchal structures, limited access to education and resources, and discriminatory party politics have continued to exclude women from meaningful participation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance women's political participation in Kebbi State:

1. Government at all levels should implement the 35% affirmative action policy by reserving a specific percentage of elective and appointive positions for women.
2. Investment in female education, especially beyond the primary level, is crucial to building a pipeline of politically aware and capable women.
3. Women should be given access to business opportunities, credit facilities, and skill acquisition programs to enhance their financial independence and political competitiveness.
4. Political parties should eliminate discriminatory practices by reducing nomination fees for women and including women in decision-making bodies.

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