

Political Violence and Women's Political Participation in Sokoto State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the forms, causes, and implications of political violence against women in Sokoto State, Nigeria, situating the analysis within broader national and regional dynamics. Drawing on secondary data from academic journals, electoral commission reports, government policy documents, NGO publications, media sources, and gender advocacy studies, the research adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory design. Findings reveal that women face multiple forms of violence, including electoral intimidation, psychological abuse, cultural delegitimization, party-level exclusion, economic barriers, and digital harassment. These practices are driven by entrenched patriarchal political culture, political thuggery, weak law enforcement, economic dependency, religious misinterpretations, and educational inequality. The consequences of these dynamics are profound, contributing to women's underrepresentation in decision-making institutions, policy imbalance in areas such as healthcare and education, weakened democratic legitimacy, and reinforcement of broader gender inequalities. The study highlights that political violence against women is not incidental but systemic, designed to silence female voices and preserve male dominance. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies, including electoral reform to criminalize gender-based violence, political party reform through quotas and reduced nomination fees, gender-sensitive security sector engagement, civic and religious advocacy for inclusive interpretations, economic empowerment initiatives, and responsible media practices.

Keywords: Political violence, women's political participation, gender-based violence, Sokoto State and Nigeria

Cite this as: Rabah, A. M., Ubandawaki, U., Dantani, U., & Marafa, M. (2026). Political Violence and Women's Political Participation in Sokoto State, Nigeria. *Rima International Journal of Education*, 5(2), 246—258.

Introduction

Democratic governance thrives on the inclusive participation of all citizens, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic background. Globally, women's involvement in politics is recognized as vital for equitable representation, social justice, and sustainable development. International frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscore gender equality as a cornerstone of democratic stability (United Nations, 1995; UN, 2015).

In Nigeria, however, despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing equality, women remain significantly underrepresented in political institutions. The country records one of the lowest levels of female political representation in Africa (Daily Trust, 2025). This underrepresentation is particularly pronounced in northern states like Sokoto, where sociocultural expectations, religious interpretations, economic challenges, and political violence converge to restrict women's political engagement (Umar, 2026).

Political violence has become a major deterrent to women's participation. Elections in Nigeria are often marred by intimidation, vote buying, physical confrontations, and organized thuggery. While male politicians also face violence, women experience gender-specific forms of aggression aimed at discouraging their involvement in political spaces (Muhammad, 2023). Sokoto State serves as a critical case study due to its strong traditional institutions, Islamic scholarly heritage, conservative sociopolitical environment, and competitive party politics. Women aspiring to leadership positions often encounter resistance rooted not only in political rivalry but also in entrenched gendered perceptions about leadership roles (Umar, 2026).

This study investigates political violence against women in Sokoto State by focusing on four central questions. First, it examines the specific forms of political violence that hinder women's participation, including intimidation, harassment, psychological abuse, and economic exclusion. Second, it explores the structural and sociocultural factors driving such violence, such as entrenched patriarchal norms, misinterpretations of religious and cultural expectations, weak institutional safeguards, and financial inequality. Third, it analyzes how political violence undermines democratic development by eroding representation, weakening governance legitimacy, and obstructing inclusive participation. Finally, the study considers measures that can enhance

women's political inclusion, emphasizing the need for electoral reforms, gender-sensitive institutions, stronger legal enforcement, civic education, and economic empowerment initiatives.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 conceptual Clarifications

2.1.1 Political Violence

Political violence refers to deliberate acts or threats of force, intimidation, and coercion aimed at shaping political outcomes. It encompasses both physical and non-physical strategies that undermine political participation and democratic processes (Falola, 2021). Importantly, political violence is not limited to election-day confrontations; it also manifests in subtle yet damaging forms such as psychological harassment, economic exclusion, institutional bias, and symbolic delegitimization (Alabi, 2023). These practices collectively weaken democratic governance by discouraging citizen engagement, particularly among marginalized groups such as women (Oluwatusin & Daisi, 2023).

2.1.2 Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP)

Violence against women in politics refers to actions that specifically target women because of their gender or are intended to discourage their political participation. Such violence can occur across multiple spaces, including political parties, communities, digital platforms, and state institutions (Krook, 2020). It manifests in diverse forms such as physical assaults, verbal abuse, online intimidation, character defamation, economic exclusion, and sexualized propaganda (Ballington, 2018). These practices not only silence women but also reinforce existing gender hierarchies, thereby sustaining male dominance within political systems (Tripp, 2019). By marginalizing women, political violence undermines democratic inclusivity and weakens the legitimacy of governance structures (UN Women, 2021).

2.1.3 Women's Political Participation

Women's political participation encompasses a wide range of activities that involve engaging in political processes, such as voting, campaigning, joining political parties, contesting elections, holding public office, and advocating for policy reforms. Scholars emphasize that meaningful participation requires

more than just the existence of legal rights; it also depends on the provision of safety, adequate resources, and institutional support to ensure that women can fully exercise their political agency (Ballington & Karam, 2005; Krook, 2020). Without these enabling conditions, women's involvement remains limited, reinforcing gender disparities in governance and weakening democratic inclusivity (Tripp, 2019; UN Women, 2021).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study employs Feminist Institutional Theory and Political Exclusion Theory as its guiding frameworks. Feminist Institutional Theory emphasizes that while formal democratic structures may exist, they often operate alongside informal norms and practices that disadvantage women, thereby limiting their access to political power (Krook & Mackay, 2011). Political Exclusion Theory, on the other hand, explains how marginalized groups are systematically prevented from accessing political authority through structural barriers rather than explicit legal prohibitions (Young, 2000). Taken together, these perspectives provide a deeper understanding of why women remain excluded from political participation in Sokoto State despite constitutional guarantees and democratic reforms. They highlight the interplay between institutional design, cultural norms, and systemic inequalities that perpetuate gendered exclusion in politics (Waylen, 2014).

2.3 Historical Context of Women's Political Participation in Nigeria

Women have historically played significant roles in Nigerian political life. In precolonial societies, influential female leaders such as market queens, queen mothers, and community organizers exercised authority and shaped governance structures (Mba, 1982; Okonjo, 1996). However, colonial administration disrupted these systems by introducing male-centered governance institutions that marginalized women's political authority (Amadiume, 1997). Post-independence politics largely preserved these inequalities, limiting women's access to leadership positions (Aina, 2012).

Since Nigeria's democratic transition in 1999, electoral participation has expanded, yet female representation remains minimal, with women occupying less than 10% of elective positions nationwide (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). The challenges are particularly acute in northern Nigeria, where lower female literacy rates, economic dependency, cultural expectations regarding

domestic roles, and restricted access to political networks further constrain women's participation (Abubakar, 2019; Ibrahim & Salihu, 2020). Sokoto State reflects these broader historical and structural patterns, illustrating how cultural traditions, economic limitations, and political exclusion intersect to hinder women's meaningful involvement in governance (Umar, 2026).

2.4 Literature Review

Scholarly research consistently identifies multiple barriers affecting women's political participation in Nigeria. National-level studies emphasize structural inequality, entrenched cultural norms, and financial limitations as major constraints (Aina, 2012; Ballington & Karam, 2005). Patriarchal political systems often associate leadership with masculinity, discouraging female aspirants and reinforcing gender hierarchies (Waylen, 2014). Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, women remain significantly underrepresented, occupying less than 10% of elective positions nationwide (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024).

Research focusing on northern Nigeria highlights additional challenges that compound these national-level constraints. Religious-cultural interpretations often limit women's access to public leadership roles, while political patronage networks remain dominated by men (Abubakar, 2019; Ibrahim & Salihu, 2020). Security concerns during elections further discourage female participation, as women are disproportionately vulnerable to intimidation and harassment (Krook, 2020). These factors combine to create a hostile environment for women's political engagement in the region.

Political violence operates within these structural inequalities, targeting women in ways that differ from male politicians. Female candidates frequently face harassment, reputational attacks, and threats designed to force their withdrawal from contests (Krook, 2020; Tripp, 2019). Such gender-specific violence not only silences women but also undermines democratic inclusivity and governance legitimacy (UN Women, 2021).

While existing literature provides valuable insights into national and regional dynamics, localized analysis of Sokoto State remains limited. Sokoto's strong traditional institutions, Islamic scholarly heritage, and conservative sociopolitical environment make it a critical case study for understanding how cultural traditions, economic limitations, and political exclusion intersect to shape women's political experiences (Umar, 2026). This study seeks to fill

that gap by examining the specific manifestations of political violence against women in Sokoto State, thereby contributing to broader debates on gender, democracy, and political participation in Nigeria.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory research design. The choice of design is informed by the nature of the data sources, which are primarily textual and documentary rather than numerical. Qualitative research is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret meanings, uncover patterns, and analyze the sociocultural and institutional contexts of political violence against women in Sokoto State. A descriptive approach enables the documentation of existing realities, while the exploratory dimension allows for the identification of new insights in a relatively under-researched setting.

5.2 Data Sources

This study draws upon a diverse range of materials to ensure a comprehensive understanding of political violence against women in Sokoto State. Data were obtained from peer-reviewed academic journals, which provided theoretical and empirical insights into gender, democracy, and political participation. Reports from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) offered official statistics and documentation on electoral processes and incidents of violence. Government policy documents were analyzed to assess institutional frameworks and legal provisions related to women's political inclusion. Publications from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) contributed perspectives on advocacy, grassroots mobilization, and gender equity initiatives. In addition, newspaper and media reports supplied contemporary accounts of political events, campaigns, and election-related violence. Finally, gender advocacy studies provided critical evaluations of women's representation and highlighted ongoing challenges in achieving inclusive governance. Together, these sources created robust evidence base for examining the structural, cultural, and institutional dimensions of political violence against women in Sokoto State.

3.3 Analytical Method

The study employs content analysis to systematically examine the collected materials. This involves identifying recurring themes such as intimidation, harassment, economic exclusion, and institutional discrimination, and interpreting how these forms of violence intersect with structural and cultural barriers. The analysis also situates Sokoto State within broader national and regional patterns, highlighting localized dynamics that contribute to women's exclusion from politics. A thematic analysis approach was adopted.

4.0 Result and Discussion

This section presents the results on the forms, causes, and consequences of political violence against women in Sokoto State, situating them within Nigeria's broader democratic challenges. It highlights how intimidation, psychological abuse, cultural delegitimization, party-level exclusion, economic barriers, and digital harassment intersect with patriarchal norms, weak law enforcement, political thuggery, economic dependency, religious misinterpretations, and educational inequality to undermine women's political participation. The analysis underscores the implications for democracy and governance, including underrepresentation, policy imbalance, weakened legitimacy, and reinforced gender inequality, while also proposing strategies such as electoral and party reforms, security engagement, civic advocacy, economic empowerment, and responsible media practices to foster inclusive political participation.

4.1 Forms of Political Violence Against Women in Sokoto State

Women contesting elections in Sokoto State frequently encounter threats intended to discourage their participation. These threats include harassment at campaign venues, disruption of rallies, and the constant fear of physical attacks. Security risks often discourage families from supporting female political ambitions, thereby limiting women's visibility in electoral contests. Beyond physical intimidation, female politicians are regularly subjected to verbal abuse and insults that question their morality, marital status, or religious commitment. These attacks are designed to delegitimize women publicly, and although psychological violence may be less visible than physical aggression, its effects are equally damaging, eroding confidence and discouraging continued political engagement.

Cultural delegitimization further compounds these challenges, as women entering politics are often portrayed as violating cultural or religious

expectations. Community pressure rooted in traditional norms discourages voters from supporting female candidates, reinforcing the perception that politics is a male domain. Political parties also serve as gatekeepers, with male-dominated leadership structures frequently denying women nominations, strategic positions, or campaign support. Economic exclusion adds another layer of difficulty, as high nomination fees and costly campaign processes indirectly exclude women, who generally possess fewer financial resources due to broader economic inequality.

The rise of digital platforms has introduced new forms of harassment, with social media increasingly serving as a space for misinformation, gendered insults, and reputational attacks against female politicians.

4.2 Causes of Political Violence Against Women

These forms of violence are driven by deep-rooted patriarchal political culture, which associates authority with men and frames women's leadership as socially abnormal. Electoral competition often involves political thuggery, where hired youth groups are used for intimidation and violence, creating unsafe environments for women. Weak law enforcement exacerbates the problem, as failure to prosecute offenders foster impunity and leaves women without adequate protection.

Economic dependency further reduces women's ability to finance campaigns or hire security, while selective interpretations of religious teachings are sometimes used to justify exclusion despite historical evidence of female leadership roles in Islamic societies. Educational inequality also restricts political awareness and confidence among potential female candidates, limiting their participation.

4.3 Implications for Democracy and Governance

These dynamics have significant implications for democracy and governance. Political violence contributes to underrepresentation, which limits diversity in decision-making institutions. It also produces policy imbalances, as issues affecting women such as healthcare, education, child welfare, and economic inclusion receive insufficient attention. The exclusion of women undermines democratic legitimacy, as democracy loses credibility when half of the population is effectively excluded from leadership. This exclusion reinforces

broader social inequalities across economic and social sectors, perpetuating cycles of marginalization.

4.4 Strategies for Enhancing Women's Political Participation

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies. Electoral reform should criminalize gender-based political violence with enforceable penalties, while political parties must adopt gender quotas and reduce nomination fees for female aspirants. Security agencies should provide gender-sensitive protection during elections, and civic as well as religious leaders must promote inclusive interpretations that support women's leadership.

Economic empowerment initiatives, including financial support mechanisms, training programs, and mentorship opportunities, can strengthen women's political capacity. Finally, media organizations must take responsibility by discouraging gender stereotypes and promoting respectful political discourse, ensuring that women are represented fairly in public debates. Together, these measures can create a more inclusive political environment in Sokoto State and Nigeria at large.

4.5 Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that women in Sokoto State face multiple, intersecting forms of political violence that significantly undermine their participation in governance. Electoral intimidation, psychological abuse, cultural delegitimization, party-level exclusion, economic barriers, and digital harassment collectively create a hostile environment for female aspirants. These results align with Krook's (2020) argument that violence against women in politics is not incidental but systemic, designed to silence women and preserve male dominance. Similarly, Waylen (2014) emphasizes that informal institutions and patriarchal norms reinforce exclusion even when formal democratic structures exist.

The causes identified patriarchal political culture, political thuggery, weak law enforcement, economic dependency, religious misinterpretations, and educational inequality mirror broader national trends documented by Aina (2012) and Ibrahim & Salihu (2020). However, the Sokoto context demonstrates localized intensification of these barriers due to cultural and religious pressures, echoing Abubakar's (2019) findings on northern Nigeria.

The persistence of political thuggery and impunity further validates Tripp's (2019) observation that violence is often embedded in African electoral competition, disproportionately affecting women.

The implications for democracy and governance are profound. Underrepresentation of women in Sokoto State contributes to policy imbalance, particularly in areas such as healthcare, education, and child welfare, confirming UN Women's (2021) assertion that exclusion weakens democratic legitimacy. The reinforcement of gender inequality across social and economic sectors demonstrates how political violence perpetuates broader cycles of marginalization.

Strategies proposed electoral reform, party reform, security sector engagement, civic and religious advocacy, economic empowerment, and media responsibility are consistent with global recommendations for enhancing women's political participation (Ballington & Karam, 2005; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). However, localized adaptation is essential. For Sokoto State, engaging religious leaders to promote inclusive interpretations and strengthening grassroots economic empowerment initiatives may be particularly effective, given the cultural and economic context.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that political violence against women in Sokoto State is multifaceted, encompassing electoral intimidation, psychological abuse, cultural delegitimization, party-level exclusion, economic barriers, and digital harassment. These forms of violence are rooted in patriarchal political culture, reinforced by weak law enforcement, political thuggery, economic dependency, religious misinterpretations, and educational inequality. The consequences are profound, leading to women's underrepresentation, policy imbalance, weakened democratic legitimacy, and the reinforcement of broader gender inequalities.

To address these challenges, several recommendations are proposed. Electoral reform should criminalize gender-based political violence with enforceable penalties, while political parties must adopt gender quotas and reduce nomination fees for female aspirants. Security agencies should provide gender-sensitive protection during elections, and civic as well as religious leaders must promote inclusive interpretations that support women's

leadership. Economic empowerment initiatives, including financial support mechanisms, training programs, and mentorship opportunities, can strengthen women's political capacity. Finally, media organizations must take responsibility by discouraging gender stereotypes and promoting respectful political discourse. Implementing these strategies will not only enhance women's political participation in Sokoto State but also strengthen Nigeria's democratic governance and legitimacy.

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