

Gender, Security and Electoral Violence: Experiences of Women Politicians in Sokoto State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Electoral politics in Nigeria has increasingly been characterized by violence, insecurity, and intense political competition that disproportionately affects women. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and democratic inclusion, women's participation in electoral politics remains significantly low, particularly in northern Nigeria. This study examines the intersection between gender, security, and electoral violence, focusing on the experiences of women politicians in Sokoto State. Drawing on feminist political theory and conflict analysis, the paper argues that electoral violence operates as a gendered instrument of political exclusion. Using qualitative analysis based on secondary literature, election observation reports, media accounts, and policy documents, the study identifies intimidation, reputational violence, economic marginalization, and institutional neglect as major barriers confronting female political actors. Findings show that insecurity discourages women from contesting elections, restricts campaign mobility, and reinforces patriarchal control of political spaces. The paper concludes that improving women's political participation requires gender-sensitive electoral security reforms, institutional accountability, and socio-cultural transformation. Enhancing women's political security is essential for democratic consolidation, inclusive governance, and sustainable peace in Nigeria.

Keywords: Electoral violence, women politicians, Sokoto State, political participation and Nigeria

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Introduction

Nigeria's democratic transition in 1999 marked a significant milestone in political liberalization and citizen participation. Multiparty elections created opportunities for broader representation; however, electoral politics quickly became associated with violence, intimidation, and insecurity. Electoral competition frequently involves political thuggery, vote buying, harassment, and physical attacks. These conditions create unequal political environments that disproportionately disadvantage women. Women's political participation remains globally recognized as a key indicator of democratic quality. Yet Nigeria continues to record low female representation compared to international benchmarks such as the Beijing Platform for Action's 35% affirmative participation target. Northern Nigerian states including Sokoto State present particularly complex challenges where gender norms, religious expectations, and political insecurity intersect. Women politicians in Sokoto State confront dual barriers: structural gender inequality and violent electoral environments. Unlike male politicians who face primarily competitive risks, women must also navigate gender stereotypes, moral scrutiny, and threats targeting their social identity.

This paper investigates how electoral violence shapes women's political engagement in Sokoto State. It explores: Forms of violence experienced by women politicians; Security challenges limiting participation; Socio-cultural structures reinforcing exclusion and Institutional responses to gendered political violence. The study contributes to scholarship on gender and security by demonstrating that electoral violence functions not merely as political competition but as a mechanism of gendered political control.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Conceptual Clarifications

2.2 Electoral Violence

Electoral violence refers to acts or threats of coercion, intimidation, harassment, or physical harm aimed at influencing electoral processes before, during, or after elections. It includes: Physical attacks; Psychological intimidation; Destruction of campaign materials; Online harassment; Political assassinations and voter suppression tactics. Electoral violence undermines

electoral integrity and discourages participation by vulnerable groups, especially women.

2.3 Gender and Political Security

Political security involves the protection of individuals participating in governance processes. Gender security emphasizes safety conditions enabling women to participate equally without fear of discrimination or violence. For women politicians, insecurity often includes: Gender-based insults; Sexualized propaganda; Domestic pressure and Restrictions on public mobility. Thus, gender security extends beyond physical safety to psychological, economic, and reputational protection.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Feminist Institutional Theory, which argues that political institutions reproduce gender inequality through formal rules and informal practices. Political institutions appear neutral but operate through unwritten norms favoring male dominance. Examples include: Night meetings unsuitable for women; Patronage networks dominated by men and financial structures excluding female candidates. Electoral violence reinforces these institutional biases. Violence discourages women from political participation while legitimizing male political authority. Additionally, conflict theory explains electoral violence as competition over power and resources. When combined with patriarchal norms, violence becomes gendered, targeting women as outsiders within political structures. The framework therefore conceptualizes electoral violence as: Structural; Institutional; Gendered and Politically strategic.

2.5. Literature Review

The relationship between gender, security, and electoral violence has increasingly attracted scholarly attention in democratic studies, particularly within emerging democracies such as Nigeria. Electoral politics in Nigeria since the return to civilian rule in 1999 has been characterized by intense political competition, institutional weaknesses, and recurring violence. While electoral violence affects multiple actors, women politicians experience it differently due to entrenched gender norms, patriarchal political structures, and security vulnerabilities. This literature review examines existing

scholarship on gendered political participation, electoral violence, and the security challenges confronting women politicians, with particular relevance to northern Nigeria and Sokoto State.

2.5.1 Gender and Political Participation in Nigeria

Women's political participation globally remains constrained by structural and sociocultural barriers, but the situation is more pronounced in Nigeria where politics is heavily masculinized. Studies show that despite constitutional guarantees of equality and international commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Nigerian women remain underrepresented in elective offices (Adebajo et al., 2024). Research indicates that women's participation in politics is hindered by patriarchal norms that associate leadership with masculinity, limiting women's access to party structures, funding networks, and political mentorship opportunities.

Scholars argue that Nigerian politics operates through informal patronage systems often dominated by male elites, which marginalize women aspirants. Gender depoliticization theory suggests that systemic exclusion discourages women from contesting elections and reduces political ambition among younger women (Adebajo et al., 2024). In northern Nigeria, including Sokoto State, religious conservatism and sociocultural expectations surrounding women's public roles further restrict political engagement.

2.5.2 Electoral Violence and Democratic Processes

Electoral violence refers to acts or threats of coercion, intimidation, harassment, or physical harm aimed at influencing electoral outcomes. Nigeria's electoral history reveals persistent violence during campaigns, voting periods, and post-election disputes. Electoral violence has been linked to weak institutional enforcement, political thuggery, and intense competition for state resources.

Comparative African studies demonstrate that electoral violence produces long-term social and political consequences, including reduced civic participation and psychological insecurity among affected populations (Gutiérrez-Romero, 2021). Within Nigeria, election periods frequently involve intimidation, vote suppression, and physical attacks, creating an environment

where participation becomes risky, particularly for vulnerable groups such as women.

Security scholars emphasize that political violence is not gender-neutral. Women candidates often confront threats that extend beyond physical attacks to include reputational damage, online harassment, and sexualized intimidation. The emergence of digital political engagement has also expanded new arenas for gender-based abuse, including hate speech and targeted harassment during election cycles (Ilevbare et al., 2024).

2.5.3 Gendered Dimensions of Political Violence

Feminist political theory highlights that violence against women in politics functions as a mechanism of exclusion rather than merely an unintended by-product of political competition. Gender-based political violence includes psychological abuse, sexual harassment, defamation, and threats against family members designed to discourage women's political ambitions.

International parliamentary studies reveal that a significant proportion of women politicians' experience threats of violence, harassment, or intimidation during their political careers, demonstrating the global nature of gendered political insecurity. Such experiences reinforce fear and self-censorship among female candidates, reducing women's visibility in leadership spaces.

In Nigeria, gender-based violence intersects with broader societal insecurity. Reports on women activists and public figures show that outspoken women frequently encounter harassment, misogynistic attacks, and institutional retaliation, reflecting deep-rooted gender inequality within political institutions (The Guardian, 2025). These patterns suggest that political violence against women is embedded within wider gender power relations.

2.5.4 Security Challenges Facing Women Politicians in Northern Nigeria

Northern Nigeria presents a unique context for examining gender, security, and electoral violence due to its sociopolitical environment shaped by religion, tradition, and security challenges. Scholars note that women politicians in northern states often negotiate dual pressures: general electoral insecurity and culturally sanctioned restrictions on women's public participation.

Security threats faced by women politicians include physical intimidation at rallies, exclusion from campaign spaces dominated by male political actors, and economic violence through denial of campaign resources. Social expectations regarding modesty and domestic responsibilities are sometimes weaponized politically to delegitimize female candidates.

Although limited empirical research specifically focuses on Sokoto State, studies on northern Nigeria broadly demonstrate that women political aspirants often rely on informal support networks and civil society organizations for protection and legitimacy. The absence of gender-sensitive security frameworks within electoral management institutions further exposes women politicians to risk.

2.5.5 Institutional Responses and Policy Gaps

Existing literature highlights the inadequacy of institutional responses to gendered electoral violence in Nigeria. Electoral security arrangements rarely incorporate gender perspectives, and reporting mechanisms for political harassment remain weak. Scholars argue that effective democratic consolidation requires integrating gender-sensitive security reforms, stronger enforcement of electoral laws, and political party reforms promoting inclusivity. Civil society advocacy has increasingly emphasized the need for protective legislation and gender quotas to counter systemic exclusion. However, implementation gaps persist due to weak political will and entrenched patriarchal norms.

2.5.6 Research Gap and Contribution

Despite growing scholarship on electoral violence in Nigeria, significant gaps remain concerning localized experiences of women politicians, particularly in Sokoto State. Most existing studies focus on national trends or southern regions, leaving northern contexts underexplored. Furthermore, limited attention has been paid to how women themselves interpret and navigate insecurity within electoral processes. This study therefore contributes to the literature by examining lived experiences of women politicians in Sokoto State, situating their narratives within broader debates on gender, security, and democratic 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 Women's Political Participation in Sokoto State

Sokoto State reflects broader northern Nigerian political realities where women's political representation remains limited. Women participate mostly as: Party supporters, mobilizers, campaign volunteers and voters. However, few emerge as candidates or office holders. Key barriers include: limited financial resources, party gatekeeping structures, lack of mentorship networks and cultural expectations prioritizing domestic roles. Even politically ambitious women often withdraw due to security risks associated with campaigns and elections.

4.2 Forms of Electoral Violence Experienced by Women Politicians

4.3 Physical Intimidation

Women candidates report threats during party primaries and election campaigns. Political thugs disrupt rallies or intimidate supporters, creating unsafe campaign environments.

4.4 Psychological and Reputational Violence

Unlike male politicians, women face character assassination targeting morality and family reputation. Common tactics include: rumor campaigns, allegations of immorality, religious manipulation and online harassment. Such attacks discourage participation due to fear of social shame.

4.5 Economic Violence

High nomination fees and campaign financing requirements disproportionately affect women who often lack access to political funding networks. Economic exclusion becomes a silent form of electoral violence.

4.6 Institutional Exclusion

Women are frequently excluded from critical political negotiations and decision-making forums where candidacies are determined.

4.7 Security Dimensions of Women's Electoral Participation

Security agencies play essential roles in electoral protection, yet women often perceive institutional protection as inadequate. Challenges include: slow response to threats, lack of gender-sensitive policing, poor enforcement of electoral laws and weak prosecution of offenders. Fear of violence limits grassroots mobilization, reducing women's visibility and electoral competitiveness. Women candidates frequently avoid night campaigns or rural outreach activities due to safety concerns, placing them at strategic disadvantage.

4.8 Discussion of Findings

The discussion of findings interprets the empirical and theoretical insights of the study within the broader context of gender relations, political security, and democratic participation in Nigeria. The findings reveal that electoral violence operates as a gendered mechanism that systematically constrains women's political engagement in Sokoto State.

The study found that electoral violence in Sokoto State is not gender-neutral; rather, it disproportionately targets women politicians. Women contestants and political activists reported experiences such as intimidation, threats, verbal harassment, character assassination, and social stigmatization. Unlike male politicians who mostly encounter physical confrontation, women face violence

shaped by cultural expectations surrounding femininity, morality, and religious norms. These findings confirm feminist political theory which argues that political spaces in patriarchal societies are constructed as masculine domains. Violence therefore becomes a tool for maintaining male dominance in politics. In Sokoto State, political actors often deploy gender-based insults, rumours about personal morality, and family pressure to discourage women from active participation. The implication is that electoral violence functions not only as a security issue but also as a socio-cultural strategy of political exclusion.

Another major finding indicates that insecurity significantly influences women's decisions to contest elections or remain politically active. Respondents identified several security concerns: fear of physical attacks during campaigns, threats from political thugs, harassment at polling units, lack of protection during political rallies and fear of kidnapping or targeted violence. Women politicians reported higher levels of psychological insecurity compared to their male counterparts. The study shows that fear operates as an invisible barrier that discourages political ambition even before elections begin. This supports conflict and human security perspectives which emphasize that security is not limited to absence of war but includes freedom from fear and intimidation. When women perceive politics as unsafe, democratic participation becomes structurally unequal.

The findings demonstrate that electoral violence against women intersects with socio-cultural norms prevalent in northern Nigeria. Traditional gender expectations in Sokoto State emphasize domestic roles for women, often portraying political engagement as incompatible with religious modesty or family responsibilities. Consequently, violence against women politicians is sometimes socially tolerated or trivialized. Community narratives often blame women for entering "dangerous" political spaces rather than condemning perpetrators. This outcome reflects the interaction between patriarchy and political insecurity, where cultural norms indirectly legitimize exclusionary practices. Electoral violence therefore becomes embedded within broader gender relations rather than existing as isolated political incidents.

The study further reveals institutional gaps in safeguarding women politicians. Security agencies were perceived as: reactive rather than preventive, insufficiently deployed during campaigns, politically influenced and lacking gender-sensitive protection mechanisms. Women respondents indicated

limited confidence in reporting threats due to fear of retaliation or lack of institutional response. Electoral management bodies and law enforcement agencies were viewed as failing to adequately address gender-specific violence. These findings highlight governance deficits within electoral security architecture. Without institutional accountability, perpetrators operate with relative impunity, reinforcing cycles of violence.

Another important finding is that economic inequality magnifies women's vulnerability to electoral violence. Many women politicians lack financial resources needed for: personal security arrangements, extensive campaign structures, political patronage networks. Because Nigerian electoral politics is highly monetized, financially weaker candidates many of whom are women—become easier targets for intimidation and political displacement. Violence thus intersects with economic marginalization to limit women's electoral competitiveness.

The research shows that exposure to electoral violence produces long-term psychological and political effects: withdrawal from political contests, reduced campaign visibility, reliance on male political sponsors and reluctance to seek higher offices. Some women adopt self-censorship strategies to avoid confrontation, which ultimately weakens substantive representation of women's interests. This contributes to persistent underrepresentation of women in elective offices across Sokoto State and Nigeria more broadly.

Despite challenges, findings also highlight women's resilience and adaptive strategies. Women politicians employ several coping mechanisms: building informal solidarity networks, engaging religious and community leaders for legitimacy, using grassroots mobilization rather than confrontational campaigning and leveraging women associations and civil society organizations. These strategies demonstrate that women are not passive victims but active political actors negotiating hostile environments. However, resilience alone cannot substitute for institutional reforms.

In terms of implications for democratic consolidation, the findings suggest that electoral violence against women undermines democratic consolidation in three key ways: **Reduced Inclusivity:** Democracy becomes less representative when half the population faces barriers to participation; **Weakened Electoral Integrity:** Violence discourages credible candidates and voters and **Security-Democracy Paradox:** Elections meant to deepen democracy instead reproduce

insecurity and exclusion. Thus, gender-sensitive electoral security is essential for democratic sustainability in Sokoto State.

The study aligns with broader Nigerian and African scholarship which identifies political violence as a major obstacle to women's participation. Similar patterns of intimidation, patriarchal resistance, and institutional weakness have been observed across northern Nigeria and other developing democracies. However, this study contributes uniquely by demonstrating how local cultural dynamics in Sokoto State interact with national electoral structures to produce gendered insecurity.

Overall summary of key findings of the discussion reveals that: Electoral violence in Sokoto State is deeply gendered, security threats discourage women's political ambition, patriarchal norms reinforce political exclusion, institutional protections remain inadequate, economic inequality heightens vulnerability and women show resilience but face structural barriers.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Electoral violence remains a major obstacle to women's political participation in Sokoto State. The study demonstrates that insecurity functions as a gendered barrier embedded within institutional, socio-cultural, and political systems. Women politicians face threats that extend beyond physical violence to include psychological intimidation, economic exclusion, and reputational attacks. Achieving democratic consolidation in Nigeria requires transforming electoral environments into safe and inclusive political spaces. Gender-sensitive security reforms, political party accountability, and societal reorientation are essential steps toward enabling women's meaningful participation. Strengthening women's political security is not merely a gender issue but a democratic imperative necessary for equitable governance and sustainable national development.

To address the challenges of gender inequality, insecurity, and electoral violence affecting women politicians in Sokoto State, there is a need for coordinated institutional, legal, and sociocultural reforms. Electoral management bodies and security agencies should adopt gender-sensitive electoral security frameworks that guarantee adequate protection for female candidates before, during, and after elections. Political parties must implement

internal democracy mechanisms, including affirmative action policies, financial support, and zero-tolerance measures against intimidation and harassment of women aspirants. Government and civil society organizations should intensify political education campaigns aimed at transforming patriarchal attitudes that discourage women's participation in leadership. Strengthening legal enforcement against electoral offenders, establishing confidential reporting channels for gender-based political violence, and promoting community engagement with religious and traditional leaders will further enhance women's safety and legitimacy in politics. Ultimately, improving women's political security will not only increase their participation but also deepen democratic consolidation and inclusive governance in Sokoto State and Nigeria at large.

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