

## **Assessment of the Role of Social Media in Facilitating Female Participation in Political Matters in Niger State, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to assess the role of social media in facilitating female participation in political matters in Niger State, Nigeria. With the increasing influence of social media platforms in shaping public discourse and political engagement, it is crucial to understand how these platforms can be leveraged to enhance female political participation, particularly, in a multicultural society like Niger State. The research adopted a survey approach with questionnaire as the instruments for data collection. The findings contribute to the existing literature on the impact of social media on political participation, with a specific focus on female involvement, identify the potential benefits, challenges, and opportunities that arise from the use of different social platforms in Niger State. The study recommends the following: Niger State group should sensitize its female audience on the need to adopt the platform to increase political awareness; Women should ensure that the political awareness gained from Niger State social media translates to improved active participation in politics at various levels; Non-Governmental Organizations should intensify efforts to educate women on the need to participate in elections.

**Keywords:** Social media, Female participation, Political Matters, Niger State, Political Engagement



## Introduction

Gender inclusion is an important element of any country's social, economic, and political development. Gender exclusion and other institutionalised inequities and inequalities in politics can lead to serious socioeconomic and political difficulties especially for plural states like Nigeria (the focus of this Working Paper), with deep social cleavages that make them prone to conflict and violence. Gender relations characterised by gender exclusion thus become more than mere analytical categories; they can be real sources of conflict, instability and discontent. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2021) puts the implications of gender exclusion more pointedly: 'societies whose political institutions are more inclusive and participatory, tend to be more peaceful and resilient, just as societies practicing exclusion tend to be more vulnerable to fragility and conflict'. Gender inclusion has been highlighted as being central to a country's pursuit of peace.

In explaining why this is so, Baranyi and Powell (2005) note that opportunities and threats to state building cannot be understood without first understanding gender roles and relations. This assertion further reiterates the argument that the search for national development in most states, especially those in Africa, is founded on a template that fails to reckon with women and their skill sets and competences. In Nigeria, within the crisis generated by religious fundamentalism and ethnic chauvinism, gender inequity and inequality constitute a unique dimension that complicates, and is complicated by, Nigeria's governance predicament. The literature on gender and development in Nigeria, and especially on the complex relationship between women's participation and Nigeria's democratic governance, is vast.

Nigeria's postcolonial governance structure has often been interrogated in terms of the north-south divide. While this framework has its own analytical limitations, it yields critical insights for understanding the geopolitical dynamics of gender roles, relations and inequality across Nigeria. Current literature has mapped these geopolitical dynamics of women's participation in Nigeria's democratic experiment. The literature demonstrates a trajectory that shows Southern Nigeria, with fewer incidents of violent conflict, as more favourable to women's political participation than Northern Nigeria. Besides experiencing fewer violent conflicts, Southern Nigeria is also noted to perform better than Northern Nigeria on more conventional predictors of women's political participation such as higher levels of women's educational attainment and increased participation in paid employment. The literature also highlights a relationship between religious affiliation and its influence on political participation. Social scientists argue that the Christian south facilitates women's political participation more than the Muslim north (Dim and Asomah 2019).

Social media or the new media play significant roles across the country as the majority relies on these media to give information regarding political issues. Social media tools are offering a significant level of digital literacy to Nigerian citizens and activist groups, and the ability to utilize social media platforms to produce alternative media coverage (Akinfemisoye, 2014). The



participation of members of a political community is usually influenced by the political information, attitudes, feelings and skills they possessed. Thus, the cognitive orientation of political knowledge about the political system of a nation is important to the quality of citizenship and health of the general public (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006). Hence, social media usage for political representation of women cannot be overemphasized. The benefits are too numerous but the question remains whether social media as a tool for improved visibility for women in politics is being harnessed.

### **Statement of the Problem**

For political visibility to be actualized, there has to be a reasonable amount of social media campaigns reeled out. A lot of sensitization and orientation through these media advert campaigns must be actively reinforced to correct stereotypes and societal patriarchy. The question as to how those who are not very knowledgeable politically can be rendered more knowledgeable about politics by means of media exposure has been the crux of research by communication scholars (Oluwatosin, Olusola, & Popoola 2020). This study, therefore, proposes to investigate how exposure to Facebook influences women participation in Nigerian politics. It sets out to determine the extent to which this media channel is properly used and how effective its usage is. Hence, the major aim of this study is to contribute novel findings to the growing empirical research in gender studies with a particular focus on exposure to Facebook and its influence on women participation in politics. Against this background this paper examined the Role of Social Media in Facilitating Female Participation in Political Matters in Niger State, Nigeria

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study explore three aspects of women’s political participation in Nigeria:

1. Ascertain the extent of Niger state women’s exposure to social media
2. Determine if Niger state Facebook group encourage women’s participation in politics.
3. Find out if women are exposed to political campaign posts on Niger state Facebook group.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the extent of Niger state women’s exposure to Facebook?
2. What is the level of Niger state Facebook group promotion of women’s participation in politics?
3. Are women exposed to political campaign posts on Niger state Facebook group?



## Literature Review

### Social Media and Women Mobilisation

The invention of internet with corresponding advancement in technology has birthed a new era in public mobilization and response. Social media has proved to be a powerful vehicle for bringing women's rights issues to the attention of a wider public, galvanising action on the streets of cities around the world and encouraging policy makers to step up commitments to gender equality (Loiseau and Nowacka 2015). They further argue that social media have global potential to close the gap in political participation between the male and female gender citing recent cases in Turkey and India as reflection of social media capability to bridge the gap that often separates grassroots women's activism from policymaking processes.

Social media possess the potential to bring gender equity and women's rights issues to the forefront of both policy making and media attention. Social media have transformed the landscape of how information is shared globally and the relationship between citizens and governments (Shirky, 2011, Loiseau & Nowacka 2015). The new media allows for the first time any individual to share content and opinions to a global audience, bypassing traditional media or other modes of information transmission. Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter have allowed activists around the world to retransmit events live to a broad online audience, such as during the Arab Spring movement (Pew Research Center, 2012). This also made it possible for local issues to metamorphose into global distress; local activists become connected with global citizens. Women's political rights activism have also capitalised on social media's unprecedented political and awareness-raising potential.

During the Wikigender online discussion, participants stressed the importance of social media in allowing gender activists to connect within and across borders, at a low cost. The surge of female bloggers has in particular helped attract a younger generation of activists, who represent a key target audience to break established stereotypes and help advance gender equality (Loiseau & Nowacka, 2015). It is worthy to note that Political mobilisation refers to the process by which candidates, parties, activists and groups induce other people to participate in politics to win elections, to pass bills, to modify rulings and to influence policies (Arthur, 2011; Santas, Asemah, & Jumbo, 2020, p.6). Often times, mobilisation is essential as it precedes and prompts participation. Political mobilisation can further be described as the way in which citizens recruit individuals to pressure political representatives.

Consequently, it is seen as form of campaign which results in a change in policy. It is pertinent to note that politics in contemporary times has assumed a different dimension and as such demands the participation of the citizens in a democracy (Santas, Asemah & Jumbo, 2020). This accounts for why the new media are increasingly being deployed to sensitise and galvanise women on political activities. In a related study, Abdu, Al-Sadique, Halilu & Aliyu (2018) researched women exposure to Facebook and its influence to their political participation in Bauchi State, Nigeria. The



study employed multiple regression analysis to analyze the relationship between Facebook use, interactivity with political figures, perceived Facebook information quality, political interest and offline political participation among the women. Findings of the study showed that Facebook use, interactivity with political figures, perceived Facebook information quality and political interest significantly correlated with women's offline political participation. The study further found that social media allow women who are marginalised in political activities to interact with friends and political figures about political issues, share and express their opinions, which encourage them to vote or participate in political party activities.

### **Barriers to Women’s Participation in Politics**

Despite the gains made in advancing women’s participation in politics, much is still desired as data suggest that the disparity between male and female possession of political power in Nigeria is still wide. To this end, the following barriers are identified as hindrance to improved participation of women in politics as adduced by journalist, NGOs and scholars:

#### **Laws**

The Nigerian government has been reluctant to implement laws to improve gender equality in politics, despite a formal support for it (Kelly, 2019). The Nigeria’s Constitution (1999) provides for equal rights in politics. This is supported by the National Gender Policy (2006) which prescribed a benchmark of 35% of seats in the legislature to be occupied by women. Nigeria also approved the United Nations’ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1985 and endorsed the 2005 Protocol of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (British Council Nigeria, 2012; Denney, 2011; Nigeria | Freedom House, 2019). Notwithstanding these efforts, lawmakers at the parliament have refused implementing gender equity measures such as binding quotas. There abound cases of bills turned down because they contradict traditional Christian or Islamic beliefs with the 2016 gender and equalities bill as a point of reference (Bako & Syed, 2018; Kelly, 2019). The bias against women is also made worse by the non-existence of electoral laws that reserve a certain percentage of office for women. Political parties are equally not guided by quotas that stipulate gender slots for elective positions.

#### **Violence**

Often, female politicians are subjected to threats, hate speech and violence. Peace Direct in a 2019 report wrote, ‘Invariably, Nigerian women are targeted in both the private and public spheres to prevent them from participating in rallies, voting and/or running as candidates. Despite decreasing incidents of violence and improved transparency measures during elections, violence against women continues to be a significant threat to Nigerian democracy (Direct, 2019, p.46; Kelly,



2019). There have been reports of thugs hired to intimidate and bully female politicians. In some areas, gangs have been hired by politicians to stop female candidates (British Council Nigeria, 2012). The National Democratic Institute prior to the 2015 election, surveyed hates speech against women across Nigeria. They used 900 observers across Nigeria's 774 local government areas, finding higher levels of gender-based hates speech in the North East and South East. They also conducted informal surveys showing that 'gender-based hates speech was sometimes accompanied by other acts of gender-based violence, including threats of divorce, sexual violence, blackmail or destruction of property.'

### **Attitudes to Gender**

Religious, economic, cultural and educational factors inform varied attitudes to female politicians in Nigeria. Though Southern women were enfranchised in 1960, their Northern counterparts had to wait until 1979. Islam is often blamed for the lower levels of participation in the north, but socio-economic and geographical factors also play a role (British Council Nigeria, 2012). The media is culpable for not offering adequate coverage to female political office holders in the country. Even when they do, the nature of the coverage is most times gendered and serves to jeopardize the credibility of the female candidates. A content analysis of newspaper coverage of four high-profile women politicians during the 2015 electoral cycle has concluded that female candidates suffered from a relative lack of coverage and a presumption of 'unviability' (Ette, 2017, Kelly, 2019, p.8). However, it is unclear if this was a product of the reporting, or reflected the marginal position of the four female candidates and the difficulties they would face given the political system and prevailing attitudes to women.

### **Parties and patronage/ Cost of election**

Politics as played in Nigeria requires a lot of cash to seek an elective position. Not many Nigerian women can afford the high cost required to canvass and secure a political office. This serves as hindrance to several women who harbour interest. Political party nomination forms cost outrageous sums sometimes running into millions of naira. Although some parties have given exception to women by offering free forms, it is yet to significantly influence the ratio of women seeking elective posts. Such waivers appear not to be adequate antidotes to the other extraneous but heavy incidental expenses that are peculiar to the Nigerian democracy model. The two most prominent parties, the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), had in 2015, waved nomination fees for women, but this did not have impact on the total numbers elected (EUCOM, 2015).

### **Women's perception of politics**

The general perception of politics in Nigeria is one dirty vocation that is reserved for unrefined people who have little scruples with bending the rules and subverting due process (Luka, 2011). The idea of regarding politics as a "dirty game" has made it very much less appealing to the female



gender to seek political positions. Nigerians are confronted with daily details of the unsavoury actions of members of the political class. Female politicians are, therefore, seen as accomplices of vile male politicians who are adept at manipulating the popular will of the people. Female politicians are perceived as deviants who are enablers of devious male politicians. It is often deemed appropriate for women to play cheerleaders role while contesting for public offices is often considered going overboard. Indignity as a hindrance, Women who are married outside their constituencies of birth (but who contest elections in their marriage constituencies) are usually categorized as non-indigenes by the people from that constituency (at least by birth). This becomes worse if the woman is married from entirely different ethnic group. Such a woman will be regarded as being over ambitious and may be prevented or discouraged. In Nigeria, Lagos stands out as the only state that embraces people from different regions and ethnic group to contest an election. However, bulks of the other states are yet to embrace this. It will go a long way in encouraging participation of women in politics.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

#### **Technological determinism theory**

Technological determinism theory as propounded by Marshall McLuhan states that technologies determine how individuals in a society think, act and operate. Critics of technological determinism argue variously that “the effects of any given technology depend mainly on how it is implemented which is in turn socially determined” (Adler, 2008, p. 4; Alencar, 2018). When applied to our study on the intersection of Facebook usage and women’s participation in politics, the theory explains the different factors (cultural, economic, and individual) shaping women’s participation in politics. McLuhan argues that changes are bound to occur based on invention and diffusion of new technology. Technological determinism theory further stipulates that technology undisputedly triggers changes in the mode of thinking among individuals, how society is organised and alters the culture of the people. According to the theory, the development of the Internet and its adoption and effectiveness in galvanizing humongous populations for political movements can alter the political culture and impact the overall political landscape. Supporting this claim, Asemah and Edogoh (2013) argue that actions and behaviour are products of new technology. Consequently, people are wired to think, behave and act because of what they have seen or heard from the media. This supposes that the manner of reaction elicited by a particular message or campaign is determined by the form of technology they are exposed to. For McLuhan, the media are fundamental to shaping human culture, and technologies are first and foremost extensions of our human capacities:

The personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each



extension of ourselves, or by any new technology' (McLuhan, 1964: 23; Flew, 2017).

Since the ways in which we communicate, and hence our culture, are embedded within the technological forms that we use, the media influence not only what we think but also how we think. The adoption of Facebook which is a new social media platform plays a pivotal role in promoting women participation in politics given the power of new media to sway a huge audience base. Applied to this study, the theory serves to explain that communication technologies are the main determinants of attitudinal change in society and perception of women involvement in politics in particular. The study is anchored on this theory because it explains how the invention of new technologies drives the development and changes in society.

### **Framing Theory**

Framing theory as first propounded by Erving Goffman is based on the belief that the media focuses attention on selected issues and then interpret them within a field of meaning. The concept of framing is related to the agenda-setting tradition but expands the research by focusing on the essence of the issues at hand rather than on a particular topic (Mass Communication Theory Online, 2021). Frames can be defined as organising ideas or themes, ways of linking together stories historically, building up a narrative over time and across political space. Framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called “the frame”) influences the choices people make about how to process that information. Frames suffix most in terms of the frame the news or social media platforms place on the information they convey. They are thought to influence the perception of the news by the audience, in this way it could be construed as a form of second-level agenda-setting – they not only tell the audience what to think about (agenda-setting theory), but also how to think about that issue (second-level agenda setting, framing theory). In relation to this study, the theory explains how Facebook frames issues relating to women participation in politics with an aim to project it as a grave and elicit a mass reaction and attitudinal change. When the bulk of the posts on Facebook are focused on women participation in politics, over time, users are more likely to begin to pay more attention than usual to it as well as view the issue from the angle of the media.

### **Research Methodology**

The study employed survey research design, having the questionnaire as the instrument for the collection of data. The population of the study comprised women in Minna Niger State, which according to the National Population Commission (2017) was 925,576. A sample size of 399 was obtained, using the Taro Yamani formula for determination of sample size. Out of the 399 copies of the questionnaire administered, 385 copies were returned and found usable. The data analysis was done, using the 385 figure of the return rate of the questionnaire.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**



**Table 1:** 1. What is the level of Niger state women's exposure to social media?

Responses	Freq	%
Very	140	4%
High	155	40.3%
High	651	6.9%
Low	25	6.4%
Very Low	36	9.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The data in Table 1 show the level of Niger state women's exposure to Facebook. The implication of the data in the table is that a high proportion of the women were exposed to social media campaigns on women mobilisation. This is based on the fact that a total of 76.7% ticked very high and high respectively.

**Table 2:** What is the extent of Niger state Facebook group promotion of women's participation in politics?

Responses	Freq	%
Very great extent	125	32.5%
Great extent	200	51.9%
Low extent	35	9.1%
Very low extent	25	6.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The table above indicates the extent of Niger state Facebook group promotion of women's participation in politics. Going by the data in the table, majority of women in the area of study took part in the election. This is based on the fact a total of 84.4% ticked very great extent and great extent respectively.

**Table 3:** Are Minna women exposed to political campaign posts on Niger state Facebook group?

Responses	Freq	%
Very great extent	125	32.5%



<b>Great extent</b>	200	51.9%
<b>Low extent</b>	35	9.1%
<b>Very low extent</b>	25	6.5%
<b>Total</b>	385	100.0

The table above indicates that women in Minna Niger state are exposed to political campaign posts on Niger state Facebook group. Going by the data in the table, majority of women in the area of study took part in the campaigns. This is based on the fact a total of 84.4% ticked very great extent and great extent respectively.

**Table 4: Extent of social Media Projection of Women Aspirants during the Election campaigns**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Freq</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Very great extent</b>	45	11.7%
<b>Great extent</b>	35	9.1%
<b>Low extent</b>	225	58.4%
<b>Very low extent</b>	80	20.8%
<b>Total</b>	385	100.0

Table 4 shows the extent social media projected women aspirants during the 2019 gubernatorial election. The data in Table 4 show that the mass did not give enough coverage to women candidates during the election.

## **Discussion**

So far, we have established and compared both northern and southern women involvement in elective politics. On the research question which sought to ascertain the extent of Niger state women's exposure to Facebook, the study found that women are exposed to Niger State page to a very large extent. Data gathered showed that eighty-four percent of respondents that either use Facebook often or sometimes compared to a paltry sixteen percent who rarely use the platform. This shows that audience dependence on Facebook for information is high. Social media platforms have remained a vital tool in the society that millions of people around the globe use. Affirming the importance of social media, Shirky (2011) cited in Loiseau & Nowacka (2015) said that it has transformed the landscape of how information is shared globally and the relationship between citizens and governments.

The second research question sought to find out the level of Niger state Facebook group promotion of women's participation in politics, the study found that Niger State page encouraged women to participate in politics. The study showed and served as an important factor in encouraging women to actively participate in politics in their locale by raising awareness of its importance through posts published in Niger state Facebook group. In Nigeria, politics involves practical steps and



actions that seek to convince people about a political party or candidate seeking an election. Aligning with the need for women's engagement in politics and modes of gaining relevance, Adedeji (2009) stated that participation in politics entails joining a political party; contributing funds to a political party organisation or candidate or attending political Fund-raising functions; attending political party events, e.g., meetings, conventions, rallies, fund-raising Functions, or other political gatherings; Carrying out administrative activities for a political party or candidate, such as Stuffing envelopes, answering or placing telephone calls, addressing correspondence On behalf of a political candidate or party; Supporting a political party or candidate.

The third research question sought to find out if women are exposed to political campaign posts on Niger state Facebook group; the study found that women are exposed to political campaigns on the Niger state page especially the Eastern Union and Dominant Women Campaign on the page. It showed that Niger State group enjoys large followership from its female audience, the bulk of who are exposed to contest and promote female participation in politics at different levels of governance. Respondents agree that women in Nigeria should wake up to the reality that political participation in a male-dominated political circle needs more than online activism to be achieved. As a result, the group through their posts encourages women to do more than share, like or comment on posts. This tally with Saka, Amusan & Aluko, (2017) assertion that the twenty-first century represents a wake-up call period for women in politics as it relates to the framing and presentation of discussions that hinged on women active participation in the political life of their societies.

## **Conclusion**

A general overview of women's participation in politics reveals that Nigeria is doing far below expectations in engendering its politics as a pathway for more women achieving political leadership despite the emergence and availability of social media. The implication of the findings that education and employment do not necessarily have a liberating effect on Nigerian women's political participation shows that Nigeria and its leadership cannot leave anything to chance in the urgent need to achieve gender equality in politics. Countries around the world are closing the gender gap in political leadership by instituting affirmative action programmes such as reserved seats and quota systems. Nigeria needs to consider similar measures.

## **Recommendations**

The study recommends the following:

1. Niger State group should sensitize its female audience on the need to adopt the platform to increase political awareness.
2. Women should ensure that the political awareness gained from Igboist translates to improved active participation in politics at various levels.



3 Non-governmental organisations should intensify efforts to educate women on the need to participate in elections



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