Socio-Cultural And Religious Barriers To Women's Political Participation In Nigeria

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Article History	Abstract
  	Women's political participation remains persistently low in Nigeria despite constitutional guarantees of equality and multiple policy commitments to gender inclusion. This study examines the influence of socio-cultural and religious norms on women's political participation, drawing evidence from the Nigerian National Assembly. Adopting a mixed-methods research design, the study combines quantitative data from 35 structured questionnaires administered to National Assembly staff with qualitative insights from 3 in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Spearman correlation, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings reveal that cultural and religious norms constitute significant informal barriers to women's political participation. Female respondents perceived these barriers more strongly than their male counterparts, reflecting gendered lived experiences within political institutions. Although higher educational attainment was associated with reduced perception of normative constraints, socio-cultural and religious expectations continued to dampen women's political ambition and perceived participation. Qualitative evidence further demonstrates that patriarchal values, traditional gender roles, and religious interpretations reinforce perceptions of politics as a male domain, subjecting women to heightened moral scrutiny and social resistance. The study concludes that formal political reforms alone are insufficient to improve women's representation unless accompanied by deliberate efforts to transform underlying socio-cultural and religious norms. Targeted normative change interventions are therefore essential for advancing gender-inclusive political participation. *Keywords: Women's Political Participation, Socio-Cultural Norms and Religious Barriers.*

Introduction

Women's political participation is widely recognised as a cornerstone of democratic governance, inclusive decision-making, and sustainable development. Across political systems, women's presence in legislatures has been associated with broader policy agendas, improved attention to social welfare, health, education, and more responsive governance outcomes (West & Duell, 2024; Schmitz & Gatenio Gabel, 2023). Consequently, global and regional frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union Gender Strategy, explicitly call for the full and effective participation of women in political leadership at all levels. Despite these normative commitments, women continue to be systematically underrepresented in political institutions worldwide, with progress remaining uneven and particularly slow in many developing democracies (Alexander et al., 2017; Ramtohul, 2021).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, women's representation in national legislatures varies considerably, reflecting differences in institutional design, political culture, and the strength of gender-responsive reforms. While some countries have made notable advances through the adoption of legislated quotas and affirmative action measures, others continue to lag due to entrenched structural and normative barriers (Tripp, 2015; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). Nigeria stands out as one of the poorest performers in the region. Despite women

constituting nearly half of the population, their representation in the National Assembly remains persistently low, with women occupying fewer than five per cent of seats in both legislative chambers following the 2023 general elections (PLAC, 2025). This enduring gap raises critical questions about the factors that continue to constrain women's political participation in Africa's most populous democracy.

Although institutional and economic explanations, such as party gatekeeping, high campaign costs, and weak enforcement of gender-responsive policies, have received increasing scholarly attention, socio-cultural and religious factors remain central to understanding women's political marginalisation in Nigeria. Political behaviour does not occur in a vacuum; it is shaped by deeply embedded cultural norms, belief systems, and social expectations that define appropriate roles for men and women within both private and public spheres (Ahikire, 2021; Nayak & Tabassum, 2024). In many Nigerian communities, leadership and political authority are culturally framed as masculine domains, while women are expected to prioritise domestic responsibilities, caregiving roles, and moral guardianship. This is primarily due to a lack of economic empowerment (Magaji et al., 2024a; Ahmed et al., 2024). These gendered expectations influence women's political ambition, family support for political engagement, party recruitment practices, and voter perceptions (Alordiah et al., 2022; Popoola et al., 2021).

Patriarchy remains a defining feature of Nigeria's socio-political landscape, operating through both formal institutions and informal social relations. Patriarchal norms privilege male authority, reinforce hierarchical gender relations, and normalise women's exclusion from decision-making spaces (Afolayan et al., 2021). Women who seek political office often face social sanctions, including stigma, reputational attacks, and resistance from family and community members, which collectively discourage political participation. These constraints are particularly pronounced in contexts where political competition is highly personalised, monetised, and embedded within male-dominated patronage networks, further reinforcing gendered barriers to entry (Silva & Klasen, 2021; Itodo, 2024; Magaji et al., 2006).

Religious beliefs and interpretations further shape the socio-cultural environment within which women's political participation unfolds. Nigeria's religious landscape - dominated by Christianity and Islam- plays a decisive role in structuring social norms, moral values, and perceptions of leadership. While religious doctrines are not inherently opposed to women's public participation, prevailing interpretations often emphasise male leadership and female submission, particularly within conservative religious communities (UN Women Africa, 2022; Ahikire, 2021). These interpretations influence voter attitudes, party calculations, and women's own self-perceptions regarding political suitability and legitimacy. As a result, religion functions not merely as a belief system but as a social institution that can either constrain or enable women's access to political power,

depending on how doctrine is interpreted and mobilised (Buiten & Naidoo, 2020).

The interaction between culture and religion creates a reinforcing cycle of exclusion. Gender norms rooted in tradition are frequently legitimised through religious narratives, while religious authority often draws on cultural expectations to justify male dominance in leadership. This convergence produces what feminist scholars describe as a "gendered logic of appropriateness," wherein women's political ambition is perceived as deviant or socially disruptive (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay & Murtagh, 2019). In Nigeria, this logic operates across households, political parties, religious institutions, and the media, shaping the pipeline from political aspiration to candidacy and ultimately to election.

Despite Nigeria's adoption of gender equality policies such as the National Gender Policy and international conventions advocating women's political inclusion, these socio-cultural and religious barriers continue to undermine implementation and outcomes. Formal commitments to gender equity coexist with informal norms that resist change, resulting in a persistent gap between policy intent and political reality (Okeke, 2023). The period between 2022 and 2025, encompassing the implementation of the Electoral Act 2022 and the emergence of the Tenth National Assembly, provides a critical context for examining how these deeply rooted norms continue to shape women's political participation despite institutional reform efforts.

Existing studies have acknowledged the role of culture and religion in shaping gendered political outcomes (Dutse, 2023; Eze & Mark, 2022; Iruke, 2024); however, much of the literature treats these factors as background variables rather than as central explanatory forces operating within specific institutional contexts. There remains a need for empirically grounded analyses examining how socio-cultural and religious norms interact with political institutions to constrain women's participation in high-level governance. In the Nigerian case, limited attention has been paid to how these norms manifest within the everyday practices, perceptions, and decision-making processes surrounding the National Assembly, particularly from the perspective of those embedded within the legislative environment.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to critically analyse the influence of socio-cultural and religious barriers on women's political participation in Nigeria, drawing on evidence from the Nigerian National Assembly. Specifically, it examines how patriarchal norms, traditional gender roles, and dominant religious interpretations shape perceptions of women in political leadership and limit their political ambition, access, and representation. By foregrounding socio-cultural and religious dynamics, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the non-formal barriers that sustain women's political underrepresentation, complementing institutional and economic analyses. In doing so, it provides context-specific

insights essential for designing holistic, culturally responsive strategies to advance women's political inclusion in Nigeria's federal legislature.

Literature Review
Conceptual Review

Socio-Cultural Norms and Gendered Political Participation

Socio-cultural norms constitute a robust framework through which political participation is structured, regulated, and legitimised within societies. These norms encompass shared beliefs, values, traditions, and expectations that define appropriate roles for men and women in both private and public spheres. In many contexts, including Nigeria, such norms continue to shape political behaviour by constructing leadership as a masculine domain while positioning women primarily within domestic and supportive roles (Alordiah et al., 2022; Ahikire, 2021). As a result, women's political participation is not only constrained by formal institutional rules but also by deeply embedded cultural expectations that influence ambition, recruitment, and public acceptance.

Gendered socialisation processes play a central role in reproducing these norms. From early childhood, women and men are often socialised into differentiated roles that emphasiseassertiveness, authority, and public engagement for men, while promoting care work, obedience, and relational responsibilities for women (Nayak & Tabassum, 2024; Abubakar et al., 2025). These social expectations shape political interest and self-efficacy, with women less likely to perceive themselves as legitimate political actors. Studies have shown that internalised gender norms reduce women's willingness to contest elections, even when they possess the necessary education, skills, and experience (Popoola et al., 2021; Silva & Klasen, 2021). In this sense, socio-cultural norms operate as pre-institutional filters that limit women's political participation long before formal nomination processes begin.

Within the Nigerian context, patriarchy remains a dominant cultural system that reinforces male authority and female subordination across social institutions. Patriarchal norms legitimise men's control over decision-making while framing women's leadership ambitions as socially inappropriate or disruptive (Afolayan et al., 2021). Women who attempt to enter politics often face social sanctions, including character assassination, moral scrutiny, and resistance from family and community members. Such sanctions are particularly pronounced in settings where women's public visibility is perceived as conflicting with ideals of modesty, marital obedience, and domestic responsibility (Alordiah et al., 2022). These pressures contribute to high attrition rates among female aspirants and reinforce the perception that politics is an unsuitable space for women.

Socio-cultural norms also influence political parties, which function as key gatekeepers to elective office. Party recruitment practices are often shaped by prevailing cultural beliefs about leadership, electability, and gender roles. In male-dominated political environments, party elites may perceive women as less competitive candidates due to assumptions about voter bias, family obligations, or limited access to patronage networks (Itodo, 2024; Nayak & Tabassum, 2024). These perceptions frequently result in women being excluded from winnable districts, denied strategic party support, or relegated to symbolic roles within party structures. Thus, socio-cultural norms are reproduced within political institutions, reinforcing gendered patterns of exclusion even in the absence of explicit discrimination.

Voter attitudes further reflect the influence of socio-cultural norms on women's political participation. Empirical studies indicate that voters in patriarchal societies are more likely to evaluate female candidates based on personal attributes, marital status, or conformity to gender expectations, rather than policy competence or leadership capacity (Ahikire, 2021; Popoola et al., 2021). Female candidates may be judged more harshly for perceived moral transgressions or deviations from traditional femininity, creating additional reputational risks that male candidates rarely face. This cultural bias shapes electoral outcomes by discouraging women from contesting and limiting voter support for those who do.

The media plays a critical role in transmitting and reinforcing socio-cultural norms related to gender and politics. Research shows that female politicians are often framed in gendered ways that emphasise appearance, family roles, or emotionality, rather than political expertise or legislative performance (Alordiah et al., 2022). Such coverage undermines women's credibility and reinforces stereotypes that portray politics as a male preserve. Media narratives also influence party strategies and voter perceptions, further entrenching gendered barriers to participation.

Importantly, socio-cultural norms are not static. They evolve in response to social change, generational shifts, and increased visibility of women in leadership roles. Civil society activism, education, and exposure to global gender equality norms have contributed to gradual attitudinal change in some segments of Nigerian society (UN Women, 2023). However, these changes have not yet translated into substantial gains in women's legislative representation, suggesting that cultural transformation alone is insufficient without complementary institutional reform.

In sum, socio-cultural norms constitute a foundational barrier to women's political participation by shaping political ambition, party recruitment, voter behaviour, and public legitimacy. In Nigeria, patriarchal values and gendered role expectations continue to limit women's access to political power, particularly at the federal legislative level. Understanding these norms is therefore essential for explaining persistent gender gaps in political representation and for designing culturally responsive strategies to promote women's inclusion.

Religion, Doctrine, and Gendered Conceptions of Leadership

Religion occupies a central position in shaping social norms, moral values, and leadership expectations in many societies, including Nigeria. As a powerful social institution, religion influences individual behaviour, community attitudes, and political engagement, often intersecting with culture to define gender roles and authority structures (Buitena & Naidoo, 2020; UN Women Africa, 2022). In the context of women's political participation, religious doctrines and their interpretations play a significant role in shaping perceptions of women's suitability for leadership and public decision-making.

Nigeria's religious landscape is predominantly Christian and Muslim, with both traditions exerting substantial influence over social life and political discourse. While neither Christianity nor Islam inherently prohibits women's leadership, dominant interpretations of religious texts frequently emphasise male authority and female submission, particularly within conservative communities (Ahikire, 2021). These interpretations are often mobilised to justify women's exclusion from leadership roles, including political office, by framing male leadership as divinely ordained and female leadership as inconsistent with religious ideals.

Religious socialisation shapes gender norms from an early age, influencing women's self-perception, political ambition, and willingness to engage in public life. Women raised within religious contexts that emphasise obedience, modesty, and domestic responsibility may internalise beliefs that politics is inappropriate or morally risky (UN Women Africa, 2022). Such internalised norms can reduce women's political self-efficacy and discourage them from seeking leadership roles, even in environments with minimal formal barriers. Religion thus operates not only as an external constraint but also as an internalised framework shaping political behaviour.

Religious leaders and institutions also play a gatekeeping role in political participation. In many Nigerian communities, religious authorities wield significant influence over political opinions and voter behaviour. Endorsements or opposition from religious leaders can shape public perceptions of female candidates and affect electoral outcomes (Buitena& Naidoo, 2020). Where religious leaders promote patriarchal interpretations, women's political ambitions may be delegitimised, reinforcing societal resistance to female leadership. Conversely, progressive religious interpretations that support gender equality remain limited in their reach and influence.

Religion further intersects with political parties and electoral mobilisation. Parties operating within religiously conservative constituencies may be reluctant to nominate female candidates due to fears of voter backlash or moral controversy (Nayak & Tabassum, 2024). Female aspirants may be advised to withdraw or accept subordinate roles to preserve party cohesion and religious legitimacy. In this way, religious norms indirectly shape institutional decision-making within political organisations, reinforcing gendered patterns of exclusion.

The gendered application of religious norms is particularly evident in the moral scrutiny faced by women in politics. Female politicians are often subjected to heightened moral expectations regarding marital status, sexuality, and family life, with deviations from these expectations framed as religious or ethical failings (Ahikire, 2021). Such scrutiny increases reputational risks and discourages sustained political engagement. Male politicians, by contrast, are rarely held to comparable moral standards, highlighting the selective use of religious norms to police women's participation.

Despite these constraints, religion is not monolithic. Feminist theologians and progressive faith-based movements have challenged patriarchal interpretations and advocated for women's leadership within religious and political spaces (UN Women Africa, 2022). However, these alternative narratives remain marginal within Nigeria's mainstream religious discourse, limiting their transformative potential. The persistence of conservative interpretations continues to shape political norms and restrict women's access to leadership.

Overall, religion functions as a powerful normative system that shapes gendered conceptions of leadership and political legitimacy in Nigeria. Through doctrine, interpretation, and institutional influence, religious norms reinforce male dominance and constrain women's political participation. Understanding religion as a socio-political force is therefore essential for analysing women's underrepresentation in the National Assembly and for developing strategies that engage religious actors in promoting gender-inclusive governance.

Patriarchy as a Structural and Ideological System

Patriarchy is best understood not merely as an attitudinal bias but as a structural and ideological system that organises power relations in society. It operates through formal institutions, informal norms, and cultural narratives that privilege men's authority while marginalising women's access to resources, leadership, and decision-making (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay & Murtagh, 2019; Dada et al., 2025). In political contexts, patriarchy functions as an overarching framework that shapes who is considered a legitimate leader and whose voices are valued in governance.

As an ideological system, patriarchy normalises male dominance by presenting it as natural, inevitable, or culturally appropriate. These narratives are reinforced through socialisation, religion, media, and political institutions, creating a shared understanding that leadership is inherently masculine (Afolayan et al., 2021). In Nigeria, patriarchal ideology permeates households, religious organisations, and political parties, influencing women's political aspirations and shaping public perceptions of female leadership. This ideological dimension helps explain why women's underrepresentation persists despite constitutional guarantees of equality.

Structurally, patriarchy is embedded within political institutions and practices. Political parties, legislatures, and electoral systems often reflect male-centred norms that prioritise competition, financial power, and patronage networks traditionally dominated by men (Itodo, 2024). These structures disadvantage women, who are less likely to control economic resources or access informal networks of influence (Enaberue et al., 2024; Magaji et al., 2025). Patriarchy thus operates through institutional design and practice, reinforcing gendered inequalities even in the absence of overt discrimination.

Patriarchy also interacts with culture and religion to create reinforcing cycles of exclusion. Cultural norms that prioritise male authority are often legitimised through religious doctrine, while religious interpretations draw on cultural expectations to justify women's subordination (Ahikire, 2021). This convergence strengthens patriarchal control and limits opportunities for women to challenge exclusionary practices. As a result, women's political participation is constrained at multiple levels, from individual ambition to institutional access.

Significantly, patriarchy shapes not only access to political office but also women's experiences within political institutions. Women who succeed in entering legislatures often face marginalisation, exclusion from leadership positions, and resistance to their authority (Krook & Mackay, 2011). Such experiences discourage retention and reinforce perceptions that politics is hostile to women. Patriarchy thus affects both entry and sustainability of women's political participation.

While patriarchal systems are deeply entrenched, they are not immutable. Feminist advocacy, legal reform, and institutional change have challenged patriarchal norms in various contexts. However, without deliberate efforts to address informal norms alongside formal rules, patriarchal structures tend to adapt and persist (Mackay & Murtagh, 2019). In Nigeria, the absence of binding gender quotas and weak enforcement of equality policies have allowed patriarchal practices to continue shaping political outcomes.

In summary, patriarchy operates as a comprehensive system that integrates culture, religion, and institutions to sustain women's political exclusion. Understanding patriarchy as both structural and ideological is essential for explaining the persistence of gender inequality in Nigeria's political landscape and for identifying pathways toward more inclusive governance.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Institutionalism

This study is anchored in Feminist Institutionalism (FI). This theoretical framework explains how political institutions are structured by gendered power relations and how both formal rules and informal norms interact to shape political outcomes (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Waylen, 2014). FI challenges the assumption that institutions are gender-neutral, arguing

instead that they embed historically constructed norms that privilege male authority while marginalising women's access to leadership and decision-making. This framework is particularly relevant for analysing women's political participation in Nigeria, where formal commitments to gender equality coexist with persistent informal practices that restrict women's political inclusion.

A central concept in FI is the gendered logic of appropriateness, which refers to shared expectations about who is considered suitable for political leadership and how authority should be exercised (Mackay & Murtagh, 2019). In the Nigerian context, socio-cultural norms and religious interpretations reinforce leadership as a masculine role, while femininity is associated with domesticity, moral guardianship, and support functions. These norms operate as informal institutional rules within political parties, electoral processes, and legislative spaces, shaping candidate selection, voter perceptions, and women's own political self-efficacy. FI is therefore proper in revealing how cultural and religious beliefs are institutionalised within political structures, often undermining formal gender equality policies.

Feminist Institutionalism also highlights why institutional reforms frequently produce limited change. Informal norms tend to adapt and persist, neutralising the effects of formal rules such as gender policies or legal protections (Waylen, 2014; Chiva, 2018). This insight is critical for understanding the continued underrepresentation of women in Nigeria's National Assembly despite policy commitments to inclusion. By foregrounding the interaction among culture, religion, and institutional practice, FI provides a robust framework for analysing how socio-cultural and religious barriers are reproduced within political institutions and why addressing women's political exclusion requires transforming both formal structures and informal norms.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine how socio-cultural and religious norms influence women's political participation in Nigeria. A convergent approach was employed, enabling quantitative and qualitative data to be collected within the same research period and analysed independently before being integrated at the interpretation stage. This design is appropriate for capturing both measurable patterns of perception and the deeper institutional meanings through which cultural and religious norms shape women's political ambition, legitimacy, and participation. The study is anchored in a pragmatic philosophical orientation that prioritises the use of multiple sources of evidence to address complex, context-dependent social phenomena.

The quantitative component of the study comprised thirty-five valid questionnaires completed by National Assembly staff, forming the core quantitative dataset. The survey instrument captured respondents' demographic characteristics alongside their perceptions of cultural norms and religious influences

affecting women's political participation, using single-choice Likert-scale items, multiple-response questions, and short open-ended items, which were subsequently coded into concise analytical categories. Although the broader questionnaire also included items on cost, party support, and institutional challenges, this article focuses analytically on responses relating specifically to socio-cultural and religious barriers, in line with the study's first objective.

The qualitative component complemented the survey data through three in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions, each comprising six participants, all purposively selected from National Assembly directorates that routinely interface with members and committee work. Interviews explored perceptions of gender norms, leadership expectations, and the role of religion in shaping women's political legitimacy. At the same time, the focus group discussions examined shared experiences and institutional narratives surrounding women's visibility, acceptance, and participation. All interviews and discussions were transcribed

and organised under thematic headings that mirrored the study objectives, with anonymised quotations identified by role and session code rather than personal identity. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Spearman correlation, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Ethical standards were observed throughout, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymisation of all responses.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Figure 1 presents the gender distribution of respondents. Female staff constituted the majority of the sample at 57.1 per cent, while 37.1 per cent were male. A small proportion of respondents (5.8 per cent) preferred not to disclose their gender. The predominance of female respondents enhances the relevance of the data for analysing gendered perceptions of political participation within the National Assembly context.
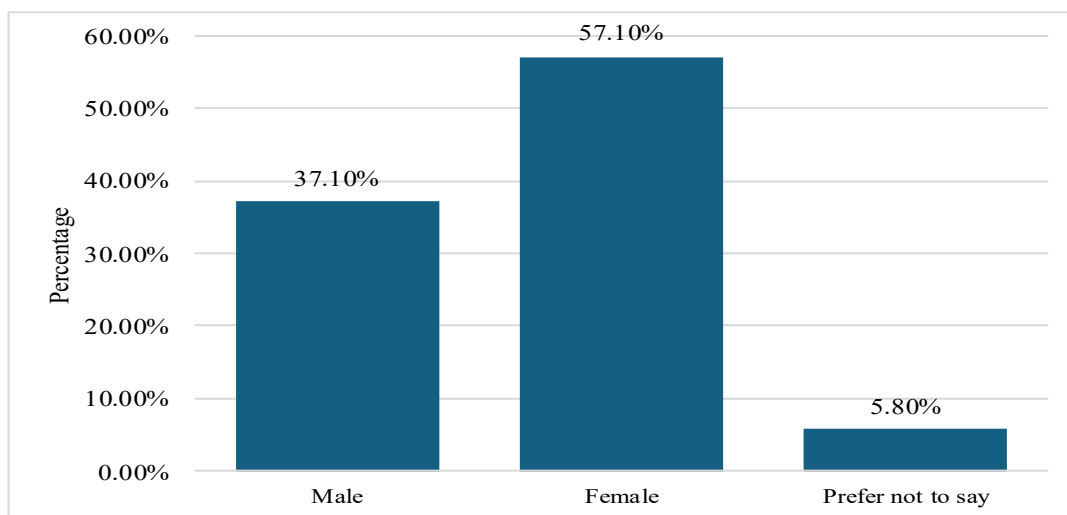

Fig. 1 – Gender of Respondents

As shown in Figure 2, the sample is concentrated in the 26 to 35 age band at 31.4 per cent and the 36 to 45 band at 28.6 per cent, which together account for 60.0 per cent of respondents. Staff aged 46 to 55 make up 20.0 per cent, while those 56 and above represent 17.1 per cent, indicating a sizeable senior cadre in the dataset. Only 2.9 per cent fall within the 18 to 25 age range, suggesting limited early-career representation.
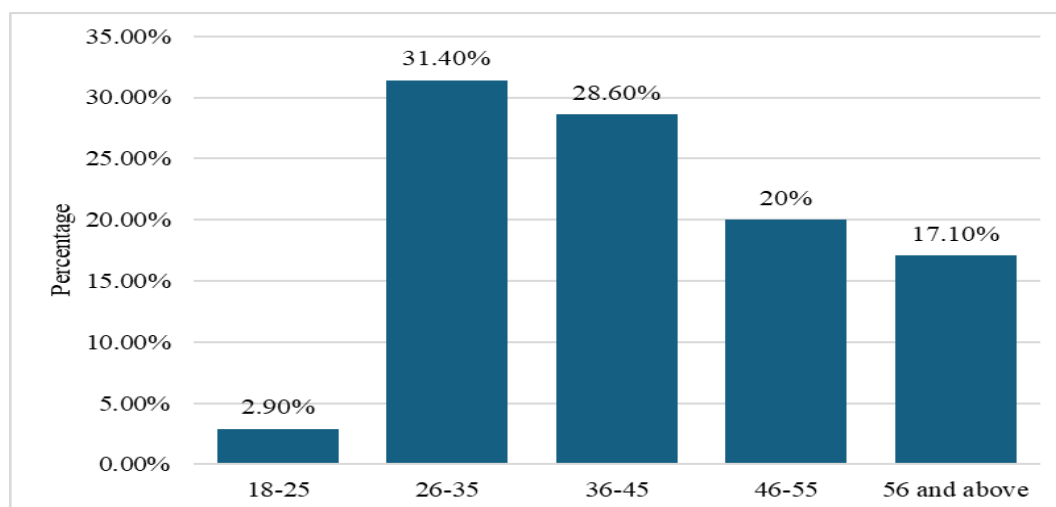

Fig. 2 – Age of Respondents

Spearman Correlation Analysis

This subsection examines how cultural and religious norms shape women's ability and willingness to participate in politics within Nigeria's National Assembly. Cultural expectations and religious interpretations are measured using three items in the questionnaire - Q6 (perception that cultural norms discourage women's participation), Q7 (significance of religious influence), and Q8 (common cultural stereotypes). Together, these items form the *Barrier Index for Sociocultural Norms*. Political participation is proxied by respondents' perception of women's active involvement in political and decision-making processes within the Assembly and their self-reported readiness to support women in leadership positions.

The Spearman correlation analysis reveals statistically significant associations between gender, education, and perceptions of sociocultural barriers to women's participation in politics. Gender shows a moderate positive correlation ($\rho = 0.482$, $p < 0.01$), meaning female respondents perceive cultural and religious norms as more substantial impediments than male respondents. Education level is moderately and negatively correlated with the barrier index ($\rho = -0.436$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that respondents with higher education tend to view sociocultural barriers as less influential.

The negative correlation between the *Barrier Index* and perceived women's political participation ($\rho = -0.527$, $p < 0.01$) suggests that stronger endorsement of cultural and religious norms corresponds with reduced belief in women's participation and leadership capacity. This pattern confirms that sociocultural expectations, particularly around morality, family roles, and gendered behaviour, continue to undermine women's political visibility and acceptance in the Nigerian context.

Table 1: Spearman Correlation Results for Cultural and Religious Norms

Variable Relationship	Spearman's ρ	Sig. (2-tailed)	Strength / Direction
Gender × Barrier Index (Cultural & Religious Norms)	0.482	0.004	Moderate Positive
Age × Barrier Index	0.311	0.067	Weak Positive
Education × Barrier Index	–0.436	0.009	Moderate Negative
Occupation × Barrier Index	–0.218	0.203	Weak Negative
Marital Status × Barrier Index	0.259	0.129	Weak Positive
Barrier Index × Perceived Political Participation	–0.527	0.002	Moderate Negative

Evidence from interviews and focus groups aligns with the correlation outcomes. Across sessions, participants emphasised that religion and culture act as "silent gatekeepers" that define political legitimacy. One senior committee clerk observed that *"women are often judged on moral grounds rather than competence; religion is sometimes used to remind them where they should belong."* Similarly, a research director noted that *"informal conversations about female leadership still trigger discomfort, especially when faith-based arguments are invoked to limit participation."*

In both focus groups, respondents repeatedly described politics as "male territory," citing community norms that reward men for assertiveness while labelling women as aggressive when they show ambition. A female participant added, *"During campaigns, it is not only about capacity; people still ask if her husband approved."* Another staff member highlighted that religious sermons during election periods often reinforce the view that women should prioritise home duties over public service. These narratives show that gendered norms remain institutionalised within political and social systems, subtly shaping decisions from recruitment to leadership allocation.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of socio-cultural and religious norms on women's political participation in Nigeria, drawing on quantitative and qualitative evidence from the National Assembly context. The findings demonstrate that cultural and religious norms remain significant informal barriers that shape perceptions of women's political legitimacy, ambition, and participation. Quantitative results reveal that women perceive these barriers more strongly than men, reflecting the gendered nature of lived political experience. At the same time, higher levels of education are associated with a reduced, though not eliminated, perception of normative constraints. Qualitative narratives further illustrate how patriarchal expectations, religious interpretations, and moral scrutiny combine to frame politics as a male domain and to question women's suitability for leadership. Together, the findings affirm feminist institutionalist arguments that informal norms operate alongside formal institutions to reproduce

gendered power relations, explaining why women's underrepresentation persists despite constitutional guarantees and policy commitments to gender equality.

Based on these findings, the study recommends that strategies to enhance women's political participation in Nigeria must go beyond formal institutional reforms to address socio-cultural and religious norms directly. Policy interventions should incorporate sustained normative change initiatives, including engagement with religious leaders, community opinion-makers, and traditional institutions to promote gender-inclusive interpretations of leadership and public service. Educational and capacity-building programmes should be complemented by deliberate efforts to foster male allyship, family-level dialogue, and public awareness campaigns that challenge stereotypes about women in politics. Given indications of generational variation in perceptions of barriers, youth-focused civic education and mentorship initiatives may further accelerate normative shifts over time. Ultimately, improving women's representation in Nigeria's federal legislature requires an integrated approach that confronts the informal cultural and religious foundations of exclusion alongside formal political and institutional reforms.

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