

Political Violence and Women's Participation: Assessing the Impact of the 2023 Nigerian Elections on Women's Political Engagement

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Abstract

This study examined political violence and participation of women in politics during the 2023 elections, focusing on the impact on women's engagement as voters, candidates, and political activists. Nigerian women continue to confront significant obstacles to political involvement despite legislative efforts to advance gender equality, which are made worse by the violence that frequently follows elections. This paper focuses on how these types of violence, such as physical threats, intimidation, internet bullying, and systematic disenfranchisement, targeted women in particular and affected their participation in the political process, and the strategies they employed to navigate the unfriendly political landscape. The study employed the Feminist Security Studies (FSS) theory as its theoretical foundation. Data used in this study were drawn from secondary sources including journal articles, newspaper publications, textbooks, social media reports, and election monitoring reports. Findings from the study show that political violence dramatically decreased women's political participation during the 2023 elections. The study also reveals examples of resilience, where women enthusiastically participated and even won elections despite the security challenges. The study ends with policy suggestions that highlight the need for more robust legislative frameworks, heightened security, and improved support to create a safer and more inclusive election environment for women in Nigeria. The study is significant as it adds to existing data on Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP) which has policy implications to promote women's political participation and create an enabling environment for upcoming elections in Nigeria and elsewhere.

Background to the Study

Violence against women in politics (VAWP) is on the rise and has been gaining global attention in recent times. VAWP is a human rights violation that hinders women's political participation and poses a significant threat to democracy, peace, and security in all states (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), 2022; UN Women, 2020). Despite being a worldwide issue, there are no internationally accepted indicators or data collection techniques to evaluate its incidence or prevalence (UN Women, 2020). Thus, making comparing data on its prevalence or incidence a lot more difficult. Notwithstanding this shortcoming, Dr. Krook, one of the specialists at the UN Women Expert group meeting on data and violence against women in politics, outlined four methods that academics and professionals employ to produce and evaluate data on VAWP. These include gendering pre-existing datasets; conducting original surveys; gathering testimonies from women; and social media analysis (UN Women, 2020). By using these techniques, researchers have been producing data on the topic that demonstrates the existence of VAWP and the necessity of offering remedies to eradicate it to foster an atmosphere that encourages women to actively engage in politics.

Historically, politics in Nigeria has been defined by a patriarchal structure marginalizing women and limiting their ability to participate, and hold elected and appointed office (Henry et al., 2023). Despite making up about half of the population, women have historically had a disproportionately low presence in political office because of various forms of marginalization. This is despite the 1999 constitution's ban on discrimination against anyone, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or sex, among other things. Furthermore, Nigeria is a signatory to numerous international conventions that safeguard and advance women's rights, including the Beijing Platform of Action, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the African Charter on People's Rights, the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo protocol), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women of 1979 (CEDAW), which it ratified in 1985, and the African Charter on People's Rights, yet women in Nigeria continue to face discrimination in politics including political violence, which discourages many of them from actively engaging in politics as candidates or voters (Schneider & Carroll, 2020; Krook & Sanín, 2020).

Global players continue to pay attention to the issue of VAWP, which is a type of gender-based violence that can take the form of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse that occurs both in person and online. To raise awareness of VAWP, leading UN representatives convened with the government and civil society in March 2022. Among the detrimental impacts of VAWP, the head of UN Women stated in her speech that women were being pushed out of public spaces, silenced, and rendered invisible (U. S. Agency for International Development [USAID], 2023). More so, from the politician survey conducted by USAID, the most frequent type of VAWP was online harassment and verbal attacks which was experienced by 44 percent of women respondents (USAID,

2023). Women voters, candidates, activists, elected officials, and electoral management professionals have all experienced cyberbullying, threats, and other forms of abuse and dehumanization. A UN Broadband Commission report referred to online violence against women as a "problem of pandemic proportion." According to the survey, 73% of women who use the internet have either witnessed or experienced cyber violence. Just 26% of law enforcement authorities in the 86 nations surveyed for the report had acted against this type of violence (International Foundation for Electoral Systems [IFES], 2024). This shows the level to which internet bullying contributes to perpetuating political violence against women.

Political violence has taken several forms, such as physical attacks, threats, intimidation, and the employment of armed thugs to sabotage elections in Nigeria (Gadua & Malami, 2022). These types of violence are frequently gendered in character, and women have been particularly vulnerable to them. To damage their reputation and deter them from running, female candidates and their supporters are commonly the targets of particular forms of violence, including sexual harassment and gender-based slander (Collignon et al., 2022). These trends persisted in the 2023 elections, prompting worries about the consequences for women's political participation in the nation. Consequently, the 2023 elections offered a significant chance to evaluate the degree to which these issues still exist and how they appear in Nigerian politics today. However, it is more insightful to consider the effects of political violence on women's involvement in the 2023 elections in the larger sociopolitical context of Nigeria. Regional differences, socioeconomic inequality, and cultural and religious factors all combine to make life more difficult for women in politics. For example, cultural and religious norms in many parts of Nigeria, especially the northern regions, pose additional obstacles to women's political participation by limiting their public roles and making them more scrutinized than their male counterparts (Fahm, 2021; Ozden et al., 2021). These elements, along with the possibility of political violence, produce an antagonistic atmosphere that deters many women from pursuing careers in politics.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, the 2023 elections also brought to light examples of Nigerian women's tenacity and resolve. Despite being threatened with violence, many women actively participated in the election process as voters and candidates. Women's advocacy and female candidates have recently used social media, formed alliances with civil society organizations, and mobilized voters to combat the impacts of violence (Chiluwa, 2023; Yüce & Çatalbaş, 2023). Even in the face of major challenges, these resilient examples highlight the agency of women in politics.

The efficiency of current institutional and legal structures in shielding women from political violence is also called into question by the experiences of women in the 2023 elections. To promote gender equality and protect women from all forms of violence, Nigeria has ratified several international treaties and passed national laws, such as "The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) of 2015," but these measures have not always been implemented consistently due to weak enforcement mechanism (Madu,

2020). Reports of violence against women occurred during the 2023 Nigerian election, underscoring the disconnect between policy and practice in defending women's political rights. Many women still experience assault and intimidation with few options for legal action.

The continuous occurrence of violence against women in politics may have had a great impact on the level of women's political representation since 1999. The report shows that at the national parliament, women only secured 3%, 4%, 7%, and 4.1% representation between the 1999 and 2011 elections respectively. While 6%, 4.5%, and 3.6% of seats were won in the 2015, 2019, and 2023 parliamentary elections respectively (Agunbiade, 2023). In both elective and appointive positions, Nigerian women's performance stands at 6.7%. This percentage representation is about the lowest in the globe and Africa as well (Abatta, 2023). Political violence and women's political engagement have been linked in recent studies, particularly concerning how political violence hinders women's political engagement (Adamu, 2023; Atim et al., 2023; Dan-Azumi & Asan, 2021; Joy et al., 2021). Nevertheless, comprehensive information on the political violence women experienced and the tactics they used to navigate the political environment during the 2023 Nigerian elections is limited. This is the gap this study endeavors to cover. Exploring the Feminist Security Studies (FSS) theory which believes that PVWP aims to keep patriarchal control over governing systems and keep women out of political arenas, the study seeks strategies to address security challenges faced by women in politics that could deter their active participation in politics.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the Feminist Security Studies (FSS) theoretical paradigm, which provides a thorough theoretical foundation for comprehending and addressing security issues and protecting women from violence, especially in the political arena. Scholars who questioned conventional security paradigms dominated by state-centric and militarized viewpoints, including Cynthia Enloe (1989), Carol Cohn (2011), and Ann Tickner (2006). These scholars helped to shape the development of feminist security studies (FSS), a critical subfield of security studies, in the 1990s. These academics contended that the experiences and vulnerabilities of women, as well as the gendered aspects of violence and power, were frequently overlooked in mainstream security studies. FSS's main goal is to rethink security by putting more emphasis on people and communities rather than governments and armed forces, with a focus on the relationship between gender, violence, and power. It challenges the patriarchal norms and structural injustices that keep women insecure and promotes inclusive and equitable security strategies that address both structural and direct forms of violence, such as physical harm and institutional obstacles to safety and participation. FSS urges the incorporation of gender analysis into security procedures and policies to establish settings that safeguard and strengthen vulnerable populations, especially women. Political violence against women is a fundamental tenet of FSS, which aims to keep patriarchal control over governing systems and keep women out of political arenas. This is especially pertinent in Nigeria's 2023 elections, where women were disproportionately the targets of voter intimidation,

harassment, and physical assault. FSS clarifies how these violent acts are intentional attempts to diminish women's political involvement and uphold social norms that see politics as a field dominated by men, rather than just interfering with election procedures. Political violence is framed as a security concern that needs immediate attention and intervention according to this viewpoint.

By applying FSS to the 2023 elections in Nigeria, the framework emphasizes how critical it is to combat both systemic and direct violence. Direct violence is verbal and physical abuse directed at female candidates, voters, and activists, which occurs mainly in public spaces, at campaign rallies, and or during voting processes. In contrast, systemic obstacles including restricted access to resources, discriminatory laws, and a dearth of accountability systems for resolving gender-based political violence are all part of structural violence. To guarantee women's safety when participating in politics, stakeholders should use FSS to examine the connections between these types of violence and call for all-encompassing, gender-sensitive strategies. To provide women's protection in the political arena, FSS also demands that security measures be reformulated and prioritized. In the context of the 2023 elections, this would entail actions like assigning female law enforcement officers to voting places, educating security guards with a gender-sensitive approach, and establishing channels for reporting instances of violence against women. Additionally, FSS promotes women's participation in electoral security decision-making processes, guaranteeing that their viewpoints influence the creation and use of safeguards. In addition to improving women's safety, this strategy promotes confidence in the democratic process.

Lastly, to address the underlying causes of gendered political violence, FSS highlights the importance of societal change. It acknowledges that to provide women with long-term security, patriarchal practices that support violence and gender inequity must be contested and altered. Applying this to Nigeria, interested parties such as media outlets, educational institutions, and civil society organizations can launch awareness campaigns that denounce violence against women and highlight the importance of their political involvement. FSS offers a comprehensive framework for establishing a more secure and welcoming political climate for women in Nigeria and elsewhere by combining short-term safety measures with long-term cultural transformation.

Historical Background of Gender and Political Violence in Nigeria Since 1999

A new era of democratic administration and political engagement was ushered in when Nigeria returned to civilian governance in 1999 following decades of military tyranny. But it was also during this time that serious issues with gender dynamics and political violence emerged. After being mainly excluded during the military regimes, women encountered significant obstacles while trying to enter the political arena. To retain power, physical and psychological violence was commonly used in the male-dominated networks that dominated the political environment (Atim et al., 2023; Victor, 2022). Social conventions that marginalized women in political decision-making further exacerbated this environment of exclusion.

Despite these obstacles, women's political participation made some headway in the early 2000s. Encouraged by local and worldwide calls for gender equality, women started to enter the political sphere. A framework for promoting more female representation was established by the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and Nigeria's adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Rahanatu, 2020; Udu et al., 2023). Women's involvement in politics, however, remains low since many are still discouraged from actively participating by systemic discrimination and political violence. The violence was frequently gendered, with threats, sexual harassment, and slander directed at female candidates to undermine their active participation.

Widespread violence and electoral fraud marred Nigeria's 2003 and 2007 elections, further solidifying the country's political violence culture (Ikezue & Ololo, 2015; Nwolise, 2007). The violence, which was frequently directed at women to dissuade their involvement, disproportionately affected them. Intimidation and abuse of women were reported during the 2003 elections. Political thugs used by male competitors frequently targeted female candidates and their supporters. In many instances, the goal of these violent crimes was to uphold conventional gender norms, deterring women from entering the political realm and leaving the home. Before the 2011 elections, international organizations and civil society groups worked together to boost the number of women in politics. These initiatives included campaigns to protect women from political violence, campaigning for gender quotas, and capacity-building programs. Nevertheless, there was still a lot of violence during the elections, and many women were threatened and intimidated. The violence that broke out in parts of Northern Nigeria after the election served as evidence of the dangers that women face when they participate in politics. Although their achievement frequently came at a significant personal cost, a few women managed to obtain elective positions despite these obstacles.

With the first peaceful handover of power from one administration to another, the 2015 elections were a landmark event in Nigerian politics. But political violence, particularly gender-based violence, also increased throughout this time. Election-related advancements and setbacks for women were both evident. The percentage of female candidates decreased significantly in 2011 (Idowu et al., 2015), although the number of women who were appointed to cabinet positions and won political seats did not increase much. These advancements weren't without accounts of women experiencing extreme violence, intimidation, and harassment. According to reports, threats of rape, physical violence, and public humiliation were frequently directed at women to discourage them from voting. Because of the frightening effect of this violence, fewer women participated in politics overall.

Many of the trends of gendered political violence observed in the 2018 elections persisted in 2019. Civil society organizations saw firsthand instances of violence against women during party rallies in Benue, Kogi, Borno, Katsina, Abia, and Imo, among other states in Nigeria. Additionally, they witnessed hate speech directed towards women during the

election process (Commonwealth Observer Group, 2019). In particular, Mrs. Acheju Abuh, a PDP woman leader of the Wada Aro Campaign Council, Ochadamu Ward, in Ofu Local Government, was burned to death on November 19, 2019, in Kogi state, amid the violence that followed the election (Oyewale, 2019). In a similar vein, in November 2019, political rivals physically attacked Natasha Akpoti, a Social Democratic Party (SDP) candidate for governor at the time, on her way to a stakeholders' meeting in her home state. Moreso, during a leadership crisis among the councilors in October 2021, male politicians beat and stripped almost nude Mrs. Cynthia Nwala, the Legislative Council Leader in Etche Local Government, Rivers State (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2019; Atim et al., 2023).

In Anambra state, about 52 incidents of PVAW were reported during the run-up to the November 2021 gubernatorial election. Violence against women, including threats, hate speech, assault, extortion, intimidation, attempted murder, and psychological violence, was blamed for the decline in women's participation in the gubernatorial race. Women's voting turnout in the nation is anticipated to decline in the 2023 elections as a result of their fear of violence, intimidation, and death (Atim et al., 2023). Although the general level of violence remained high, there were instances where civil society organizations and women's groups were better equipped to combat these violent activities. Raising awareness of the problem and receiving focused assistance from foreign organizations helped shield some female voters and politicians (Olsson, 2022). Even though these achievements were not uniform, many women still faced serious risks. The enduring nature of violence despite these initiatives highlighted the pervasiveness of gender inequality and the difficulties in altering deeply ingrained political systems. Given Nigeria's history of gender-based and political violence, the 2023 elections marked both continuity and change. Significant violence against women still plagued the 2023 elections, especially in areas with intense political competition, despite efforts by the government, civil society, and international partners to protect women's rights and a greater awareness of the need to address gender-based political violence.

Evidenced-based Cases of Political Violence against Women in the 2023 Nigerian Elections

There were several instances of political violence in the various Nigerian states before, during, and following the presidential and national assembly elections on February 25 and the governorship and state house of assembly elections on March 18, 2023. During the 2023 elections, women experienced direct physical abuse and intimidation. One of the most prominent cases in the run-up to the 2023 elections was the brutal killing of a former PDP leader in Abia state, who was one of four individuals slain in Ohafia Local Government Area (LGA) in March 2022. In another case, a leader of the Labour Party (LP) in Kaura LGA, Kaduna state, was killed in November 2023 following a raid on her home by gunmen. (USAID, 2023). According to the election report, voting in Ward 12 Emohua LGA, Ubimini Rivers State was halted after a man named Mark Orduize and a pregnant woman named Ruth Osah were killed close to a polling station. This prompted other voters and INEC officials to fly the election arena (Eromosele, 2023). In another scenario,

according to press reports verified by CCIJ, four people were charged with radicalism and inciting vehemence in the Nembe district of Bayelsa state with records of three deaths in the days preceding the presidential election, including Queen Kieriseiye's murder. The Centre for Collaborative Investigative Journalism (CCIJ) was also informed that Ms. Kieriseiye was expecting a child at the time of her passing (Olajide et al., 2023).

In the 2023 election, there were also numerous instances of physical assault. Particularly in regions where political rivalry was fierce, political thugs frequently attacked female voters and politicians. Women were reportedly physically attacked at polling units in Lagos, for example, and some of them suffered injuries so serious they needed to be admitted to the hospital. In Aguda, Surulere, Lagos, a prominent incident occurred when thugs stabbed Mrs. Jennifer Efedo in the face (Jimmo, 2023; Ejekwonyilo, 2023). Despite their actions, Mrs. Jennifer persisted in exercising her franchise, and she succeeded in casting her vote. While political thugs stole ballot boxes, disrupting the electoral process. In another scene, a woman in Edo state was shot dead by attackers who fired intermittently at her polling unit while the results were still being tabulated Ejekwonyilo (2023).

The International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Nigeria also bewailed the wave of assaults on women that occurred during the general elections on February 25. According to FIDA Nigeria, at some voting places in various states throughout the nation, its observers saw instances of physical, patriarchal, and other types of abuse against women. Amina Agbaje, the association's national president, brought attention to incidents of violence against women in the states of Borno, Kaduna, Edo, and Lagos. She claims that there have been instances of physical abuse against women at Polling Unit 18, Ward 8, Marte LGA, Borno State. According to Ejekwonyilo (2023), these incidences contributed to limiting women's participation in these units.

Along with physical violence, kidnapping is another tactic used to deny women the right to vote and deter them from entering politics, particularly as candidates. This strategy was employed in the election of 2023 in Nigeria. Vanguard documented a noteworthy kidnapping case, stating that gunmen kidnapped Mrs. Gertrude Njar, the Cross River State Commissioner for Women Affairs, early morning on Wednesday near Mayne Avenue, Calabar, the state capital (Uchechukwu, 2023). This type of violence is typically committed by thugs hired by political rivals to target female candidates or prominent female politicians to demoralize their supporters and cause psychological harm to the victim.

In a different aspect, civil society organizations saw firsthand instances of violence against women during party rallies in Benue, Kogi, Borno, Katsina, Abia, and Imo, among other states in Nigeria. During the election process, they also witnessed hate speech directed towards women (Commonwealth Observer Group, 2019). During the 2023 elections, sexual harassment was a common type of VAWP in the southern states of Lagos and Rivers. Face-to-face and online threats of sexual assault were directed at female

candidates, especially those running for prominent posts. Records show that male opponents and their supporters in Lagos have harassed female activists by using explicit threats and sexually offensive language. In addition to discouraging women from voting, this type of violence was intended to harm women's reputations and undermine their trustworthiness in the eyes of the electorate.

One of the main strategies employed in many states to prevent women from participating in political campaigns was psychological intimidation. Anonymous threats to withdraw from the elections or suffer severe consequences were sent to female candidates via social media, text messages, and phone calls. In particular, South-South Nigerian (Rivers State) Senator Betty Apiafi, the chairperson of the Senate Committee on Women Affairs, disclosed how she was threatened with death by unidentified individuals and other politicians, who called and threatened her in the run-up to the 2023 elections (Kuni, 2023). A culture of dread was fostered by the use of psychological intimidation, which deterred many women from actively participating in the election process or running for office. In this context, the National Democratic Institute (2017) pointed out that psychological violence, which includes abuse and harassment, aims to delegitimize women as political actors by undermining their self-esteem, competence, and visibility in public and political arenas, all of which have an effect on how they are portrayed and viewed. Women's confidence in taking part in the male-dominated voting process is impacted when they experience psychological assault.

Cyber harassment as a kind of VAWP, especially in urban areas, increased significantly during the 2023 elections. Online harassment of female activists and candidates included misleading information dissemination, libelous campaigns, and threats of death. The NGO ElectHER's gender-based violence assessment of the 2023 elections provided evidence for this assertion, revealing that media smear campaigns and blackmailing were actively employed against female politicians. Media outlets frequently portrayed female politicians as "promiscuous" or "cunning," and in certain instances, they declined to cover their campaigns, purportedly at the request of opposition authorities and candidates, according to the report (Ubanagu, 2024). Another aspect is that during the 2023 elections, women in politics in conflict-prone regions such as Borno and Yobe states, where Boko Haram and other rebel groups have been active were the objects of targeted attacks. Violent attacks disrupted female political gatherings, including voter education programs and campaign events. Women's political gatherings have reportedly been interrupted, resulting in multiple injuries and the dispersal of the group. The goal of these attacks was to intimidate women and keep them from joining political organizations, which would have limited their capacity to effectively campaign or organize voters.

Voter suppression strategies were used in numerous states throughout the country to deny women and other voters the right to vote in the 2023 elections. Voter registration procedures, such as purposefully denying voter cards and erecting logistical obstacles on election day, were allegedly manipulated to prevent voters from exercising their right to vote. These strategies were part of larger attempts to lower female voter turnout,

especially in places where women were seen to be more inclined to back opposition candidates. Thus, the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) to Nigeria's general election in 2023 condemned the use of organized violence and obstruction by thugs with a variety of political agendas to prevent voters from exercising their right to free choice (EU EOM, 2023).

Women's involvement in politics has been demonstrated to be negatively impacted by political violence. The fear of political violence is the main factor preventing women from actively participating in elections as candidates and voters, as many stakeholders cite culture, violence intimidation, and a lack of funding as major obstacles to participation (EU EOM, 2023). Notably, many women in different parts of the country were persistent in participating in the 2023 election as voters, candidates, observers, and activists despite fear of violence which has become a culture of politics in Nigeria. Even if some women managed to overcome these anxieties and took an active part in the 2023 election, sufficient steps must be implemented to end violent elections, particularly those that target women to deter them from actively participating in politics.

Nigerian Women's Coping Strategies and Resilience in the Face of Political Violence

Nigerian women have increasingly resorted to collective action and solidarity as a crucial coping strategy in the face of political violence. Women's organizations, networks, and groups have been crucial in helping women who are threatened or experience violence. To mobilize money, provide legal aid, and create safe spaces for women in politics, organizations such as the Nigerian Women Trust Fund (NWTF) and the Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) have been crucial. These groups frequently work at the local level, holding training sessions, workshops, and lobbying campaigns to encourage women to unite in the face of political violence. Women are much strengthened by the sense of belonging and purpose these groups provide, which enables them to face the difficulties of political engagement despite the dangers.

Using the legal system and legal advocacy is another essential coping strategy for Nigerian women who are victims of political violence. Despite the constraints of Nigeria's legal system, numerous women have effectively used the laws in place to pursue safety and justice. For instance, despite certain seeming flaws, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) of 2015 has given women a legal framework to contest political violence in court (Madu, 2020). Legal professionals and supporters of women's rights have also been instrumental in assisting female activists and candidates who have been the targets of violence. In addition to pursuing justice for themselves, these women have established significant legal precedents that deter future acts of violence through their planned litigation. Although it is frequently difficult and slow, using the legal system is a type of resilience that enables women to resist systemic violence.

Nigerian women are now using social media as a tactical tool to combat political violence. To draw attention to their experiences, rally public support, and hold offenders accountable, women have increasingly resorted to both traditional and new media.

Particularly on social media, women now have a strong voice, may share their experiences of violence, and can influence public opinion against political violence. To raise awareness and urge authorities to act, for example, numerous female candidates and activists acknowledged instances of assault and harassment through phone calls and social media platforms and documented them on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram during the 2023 elections (Kuni, 2023). When criminals are aware that their activities will be widely publicized and denounced, they are less inclined to commit violent crimes, therefore the prominence that media platforms offer can also serve as a deterrent.

Another useful coping strategy for women who have experienced political violence is networking and mentorship programs. Through these initiatives, women can get in touch with seasoned female activists, legislators, and professionals who can provide support, direction, and counsel. For instance, initiatives such as the Nigerian Women's Political Empowerment Program and the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN) offer young and aspiring female politicians' mentorship, assisting them in navigating the political environment and creating plans to reduce the likelihood of violence. For instance, UN Women and INEC collaborated to host a workshop on preventing and reducing violence against women with security forces before the 2023 elections (INEC, 2023). Additionally, a Community of Practice of Women in Governance was established by the FCDO Partnerships to Engage, Reform, and Learn (PERL), which encouraged and mentored female politicians to get more involved in politics (USAID, 2023). In addition to offering helpful guidance on how to deal with threats and violence, mentoring also acts as an emotional support system, assisting women in developing resilience and self-assurance. These networks frequently establish a network of support for women in times of need, ensuring that they are not left to face political violence alone.

Women's ability to tolerate political violence has been greatly aided by psychological resilience. To cope with the stress, anxiety, and trauma brought on by violence and threats, many women use coping mechanisms. Spiritual exercises like prayer and meditation, which offer emotional support and a sense of control in the face of uncertainty, can be a part of these tactics. Women also frequently turn to close friends and family for emotional assistance, sharing their experiences and worries with dependable people who can provide support and direction. To address the psychological effects of political violence, women occasionally also seek professional counseling or treatment. Developing psychological resilience is essential to preserving women in politics' mental health and well-being so they may carry on with their profession despite obstacles.

Training in self-defense and capacity building have grown in importance as coping strategies for Nigerian women who experience political violence. Women's organizations frequently incorporate personal safety, dispute resolution, and threat response into their training programs. In addition to offering both practical and emotional support, international groups like UN Women, Amnesty International, and the African Union have been outspoken in their condemnation of political violence against women in Nigeria (UN Women Africa, 2024). These groups frequently provide funding for

initiatives that empower women, give Nigerian women a forum to tell their stories with a worldwide audience, and advocate for increased international pressure on the Nigerian government to uphold women's rights. The foreign community's support not only raises Nigerian women's spirits but also gives them a voice, which makes it more difficult for political violence to go unreported or unpunished.

Lastly, in response to political violence, Nigerian women have shown resilience by modifying and creating new campaign tactics. Many women have created different strategies for interacting with voters and running their campaigns after realizing the dangers. Some female candidates, for instance, have switched from big public rallies, which are frequently the scene of violence, to more intimate gatherings or door-to-door canvassing. Others have made use of technology, reaching voters through SMS, social media, and other online channels while lowering the possibility of a physical altercation. The inventiveness of Nigerian women, who are figuring out methods to advocate for change and engage in politics despite the constant threat of violence, is reflected in these adaptive strategies. These women exhibit a resilience that allows them to stay involved in politics despite major obstacles by consistently changing their strategies.

Suggestions to Promote Women's Political Engagement

This paper makes the following suggestions to enhance women's participation in politics.

1. Developing stronger laws to safeguard women

Nigeria's present legislative frameworks, like the Electoral Act and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP), offer some degree of protection for women against political violence. However, these laws must be reinforced and implemented to protect women sufficiently. This entails tougher sanctions for those who commit acts of political violence, stronger enforcement systems, and the creation of specialized courts or tribunals to deal with instances involving political violence against women. Additionally, the legal definition of political violence should be broadened to encompass not only physical violence but also economic, psychological, and cyber aggression.

2. Strengthening election security measures

It is imperative to strengthen security measures targeted primarily at protecting women, especially in light of the high incidence of political violence during elections. This may entail setting up dedicated security units to keep an eye on and address threats against female candidates and voters, increasing the number of female security guards at voting places, and developing safe spaces for women during elections. Training on gender-sensitive strategies for dealing with election-related violence should also be provided to security agencies so that they are prepared to successfully safeguard women.

3. Encouraging political reforms that consider gender

Political changes that support women's political involvement and gender equity are vital in a democratic system. This entails establishing and implementing gender quotas at all governmental levels, guaranteeing women's equal participation in political parties, and advocating for gender-sensitive election procedures. Adopting internal regulations that

shield female members from harassment and abuse and fostering more welcoming conditions that encourage women's political aspirations should be a mandate or an incentive for political parties.

4. Enhancing women's access to justice

For women who are victims of political violence, access to justice continues to be a major obstacle. Enhancing women's access to legal services should be the main goal of policy. This includes offering free legal aid, setting up dedicated legal support units for female politicians, and developing gender-sensitive legal processes that facilitate the reporting and prosecution of political violence cases by women. To guarantee that these organizations are more receptive to the interests of women, initiatives should also be made to enhance the representation of women in the legal system and law enforcement.

5. Empowerment via learning and developing capabilities

For women to be empowered to engage in politics and protect themselves from political violence, education and capacity-building initiatives are essential. These workshops ought to emphasize campaign skills, legal literacy, leadership development, resilience-building, and personal safety. Reaching women in underprivileged communities should receive special emphasis because they are frequently the most at risk from political violence.

6. Building up political networks for women

Women's political networks, both domestic and foreign, are essential for assisting female activists and politicians. The expansion and strengthening of these networks are necessary to offer women more all-encompassing assistance, such as peer-to-peer learning opportunities, mentorship programs, and forums for group activism. The effect of women's networks can be increased and larger coalitions for change can be formed by promoting cooperation between them and other civil society organizations.

7. Using technology to promote political participation

Women's political participation can be increased and the likelihood of political violence can be decreased with the use of technology. It is important to support and encourage women to use digital platforms for advocacy, voter engagement, and campaigning. To shield women from cyberbullying and cyberviolence, cybersecurity and digital safety training is also crucial. Women should also have access to cutting-edge technical solutions, such as smartphone apps for reporting violence and protecting personal information.

8. Raising advocacy and public awareness

Campaigns to raise public awareness are essential for altering society's perceptions of women in politics and lowering the threshold for political violence. These campaigns should dispel myths about women's roles, emphasize the contributions made by women to politics, and advance the notion that PVAW is intolerable.

9. Database, measurement indicators, and data collection methods

There is a need to build a database and have internationally accepted indicators and data collection methods to measure VAWP. This will enable researchers to conduct adequate studies and collect reliable data across the globe on VAWP. It would further assist in providing solutions to the problem of VAWP and promote a safer and more inclusive election environment for women globally and in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study examined political violence and participation of women in politics during the 2023 elections, focusing on how political violence undermined women's engagement both as voters, candidates, or political activists, and the strategies women employed to navigate the unfriendly political landscape. Women's political participation is essential to democratic governance in Nigeria and is a prerequisite for attaining gender equality. Nonetheless, the constant fear of political violence, however, continues to be a major obstacle to women's full and active participation in politics. To address this issue necessitates a multifaceted strategy including, advancing gender-sensitive political reforms, empowering women through networks and education, and increasing legal protections among others. By putting these policy suggestions into practice, Nigeria may establish a more welcoming political atmosphere that not only shields women from abuse but also promotes and fosters their aspirations for political office.

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