

## **Gendered Pathways to Power: Women's Agency Within Patriarchal Political Institutions in Sokoto State**

**Saudatu Tukur Umar**

*Department of Political Science,  
Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto*

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### **Abstract**

**A**lthough democratic norms formally guarantee equal political rights, access to political power remains uneven, with women navigating pathways that are more constrained and limited than those available to men. This is especially pronounced in North-West Nigeria, where sociocultural norms and patriarchal structures shape political participation. This paper examines the lived experiences of female elected officials and political appointees in Sokoto State, exploring how they navigate to access power and exercise agency within unique sociopolitical contexts. Qualitative method was used for the study through the use of interviews and feminist institutionalism was applied as the theoretical framework. Findings reveal that women often rely on networks of patronage, moral legitimacy and negotiation to access political power. The paper concludes that women's agency in Sokoto manifests not as outright resistance but as strategic negotiation to access and sustain power within patriarchal frameworks.

**Keywords:** *Women, Political Participation, Gender, Leadership, Power*

**Corresponding Author:** Saudatu Tukur Umar

## **Background to the Study**

Globally, the inclusion of women in decision-making processes is now recognized as a cornerstone of democratic governance and sustainable development. The United Nations and international feminist movements have repeatedly emphasized that governance structures devoid of women's perspectives risk reproducing inequality and undermining social justice (UN Women, 2022). In Africa, countries such as Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda have demonstrated that increasing women's descriptive representation often translates into more inclusive governance practices (Burnet, 2011; Goetz & Hassim, 2003). In Nigeria, however, the gap between normative commitments and political reality remains stark. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and the adoption of progressive frameworks like the 35% Affirmative Action policy, women's representation in political offices has remained very low since 1999 (Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2003; Oloyede, 2016). The situation is particularly pronounced in the predominantly North-West region of the country, where socio-religious norms, patriarchal political structures, and economic dependency intersect to limit women's access to political power (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2004; Yusuf, 2019).

According to a 2023 report by Agora Policy, Northwestern states such as Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara had no female representation in their State Houses of Assembly for both the 2019–2023 and 2023–2027 legislative tenures. In this, Sokoto state provides a distinctive yet revealing context for understanding these dynamics as a predominantly Muslim state where social institutions are deeply embedded in patriarchal and religious traditions that define gender roles and leadership legitimacy. Studies have shown that as at 2025, no woman holds an elected position in the state whereas for appointed positions, only 11% of women executive positions in the core agency and ministries while men hold 89% of the executive positions in the state. Thus, it could be argued that while there have been individual appointments of women to executive positions, such as commissioners, and permanent secretaries, these instances are exceptions rather than the norm and do not significantly alter the overall landscape of female political representation in the state. Even in career positions such as directors and heads of ministerial departments and agencies, women's career progression is highly limited and undermined by certain socio-cultural and political challenges unique in the region. Impliedly, women's public participation in the region particularly in formal politics has historically been constrained by misinterpretations of religious texts, gendered access to education, and the dominance of male patronage networks. Yet, within this restrictive context, a number of women have defied the odds to assume political leadership roles, navigating complex terrains that often demand a balance between exercising agency and negotiating patriarchal resistance.

In Nigeria, while some research focused on women's political marginalization at the national level, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding the day-to-day realities, coping strategies, as well as overt and subtle forms of resistance employed by women who have managed to navigate the system. Existing literature often overlooks the voices of women who are not just participating, but are actively engaged in routine duties and responsibilities for shaping power structures at the sub-national level. The absence of localized, experience-based knowledge contributes to the persistence of challenges and policy failures. There is therefore the need for

a study that centers on the voices and experiences of women in power particularly in the Northwest region, being one of the most conservative regions with very low women representation in the country.

This study therefore is set to not merely examine why women are underrepresented in politics, but how those who have gain access to power navigate, survive in a region where social institutions are deeply embedded in patriarchal and religious traditions that define gender roles and leadership legitimacy. In exploring this, the paper centers the lived experiences of women in appointed and elected positions in Sokoto State. By documenting their experiences as well as trends that underscore their assertion to power the paper contributes to broader debates on how women in deeply traditional societies negotiate political legitimacy without outrightly confronting entrenched patriarchy.

### **Conceptual Clarification and Theoretical Framework**

**Power:** Power refers broadly to the ability of individuals or groups to influence decisions, control resources, shape institutional practices, and set the parameters of acceptable political behavior. Max Weber (1947) famously defines power as the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be able to carry out their will despite resistance, highlighting the inherently contested nature of political interactions. He distinguishes power from authority, which is power recognized as legitimate and identifies three types of authority; traditional authority (based on custom), Charismatic authority (based on personality), Legal-rational authority (based on formal rules). This implies that political power is legitimate when backed by authority. Weber's typology has been foundational in political sociology and continues to influence how scholars analyze state authority and leadership legitimacy, especially in bureaucratic and electoral systems.

**Women Political Participation:** The concept of women's political participation has evolved significantly over the past few decades, encompassing both formal and informal dimensions of political engagement. At its core, it reflects the extent to which women are involved in decision-making processes and occupy positions of political leadership, representation, and influence. The conceptual issues surrounding women's political participation have evolved significantly over the past decades. While there is no consensus among scholars on the most effective means of achieving gender parity in politics, scholars have identified gender biases in traditional theories of political participation and moral reasoning (Steuernagel, 1987). This has led to a re-examination of how political participation is defined and measured, considering women's unique experiences and perspectives transforming the relationship between politics, and gender with research expanding to cover diverse areas and topics (Alexander et al., 2016). In addition, different theoretical paradigms have emerged, including mainstream political science, Marxist, and feminist. Despite progress, women's political empowerment remains unequal to men's globally, prompting calls for a more comprehensive definition and measurement of women's political empowerment as a transformative process (Alexander et al., 2016). Contemporarily, there are major debates and contradictions that have continued to exist in the literature; first, while some scholars argue that gender quotas are necessary to break structural barriers (Tripp et al., 2006), others warn they may reinforce tokenism (Dahlerup,

2006). Second, while descriptive representation is important, it does not guarantee that women will advocate for feminist or gender-sensitive policies (Celis et al., 2008). Third, western feminist models on women political participation do not fit African contexts where patriarchy is institutionalized and political participation is more often than not on informal levels. Thus, scholars like Obioma Nnaemeka (2004) call for African-centered models such as "nego-feminism", which emphasize negotiation and local values.

**Women Agency:** Feminist scholars, has argued on the notion of women agency to refers not simply to women's ability to act freely but to their capacity to navigate and make meaning of constraints imposed by patriarchal systems (Mahmood, 2005). The literature on women's agency highlights the importance of not only gaining access to power but also exercising power effectively once in office. Women agency here, has to do with capacity of women to strategically act on issues that concerns them or of interest to them. It also has to do with the capacity of women to independently exercise power and influence policy making decisions. Cornwall (2017) and Goetz and Hassim (2003) argue that real empowerment involves the capacity to influence decision-making, rather than merely occupying political positions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts Feminist Institutionalism to provide a robust lens for understanding how women navigate power within male-dominated political systems. The feminist institutionalism emerged as a response to traditional institutionalism, which often overlooked or marginalized gender. Scholars in political science and sociology, such as Miriam A. Goldstein, S. Laurel Weldon, Nicola Smith, and Aili Mari Tripp, have been influential in developing and promoting this approach. They emphasize that institutions are not neutral but they are gendered, and this gendering impact policy-making, governance, and women's participation in politics. Chapell (2006) argued that traditional new institutionalism was blind to gender. Feminist institutionalism fills that gap by drawing attention to the role of power, identity, and agency within gendered structures.”

Feminist institutionalism provides a useful framework for understanding the institutional barriers and challenges that women in political power in northwestern Nigeria face. It explains how political institutions are structured in ways that may disadvantage women, especially in male-dominated spaces, how women, through their agency, can challenge or navigate these institutional structures and the role of gendered practices in shaping the political careers of female political leaders, and how these practices impact their decision-making power. By using feminist institutionalism, it will serve a guide to analyzing the systemic challenges women face within political institutions and how these challenges affect their ability to exercise power and influence. It also provides a framework to explore how women in power deploy strategies to overcome gendered barriers within political institutions. Thereby, enabling a deeper understanding of how power, resistance, and resilience intersect in women's political lives in northwestern Nigeria.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences of women in political power in Sokoto State. Phenomenology is particularly useful for understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences within social and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2013). The purpose here was not to generalize but to interpret how women construct agency and confront adversity in a political environment defined by gendered hierarchies and religious conservatism.

**Study Area:** The study area for this research is Sokoto State, located in Nigeria's North-West geopolitical zone. The state's political culture is shaped by deep-rooted Islamic traditions, patriarchal authority structures, and high levels of female illiteracy (Yusuf, 2019). These characteristics make Sokoto an instructive case for examining women's political participation within contexts where religion, gender, and power are tightly interwoven. Politically, Sokoto exhibits a dominance of male elites in party structures, reflecting what Akinyemi (2021) describes as a "masculinized political economy of access." Yet, women have emerged albeit in small numbers as commissioners, and special advisers, offering an opportunity to study their adaptive strategies of agency and negotiation of legitimacy within the system.

**Population and Sampling:** The study targeted female elected officials and political appointees who served between 1999 to 2023 in Sokoto State. These included members of the State House of Assembly, local government chairpersons, commissioners, and special advisers, permanent secretaries, councilors and state women leaders. A total of 54 respondents participated in the study consisting of female permanent secretaries, commissioners, special advisers, executive secretaries, female councilors, female political party contestants, and women leaders. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify respondents who met the study's criteria of holding substantive political roles. Purposive sampling was used to deliberately select respondent's technique proved valuable because women politicians in Sokoto operate within close networks shaped by trust and discretion. Access was thus facilitated through referrals and introductions by politically active women leaders and civil society advocates.

**Data Collection Methods:** Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews complemented by informal conversations and document analysis. The interview guide covered themes such as motivations for political participation, pathways to power, experiences of discrimination, strategies of negotiation, and perceptions of influence in governance. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, conducted in English and Hausa depending on respondents' preferences. Interviews were conducted in participants' offices, residences, or neutral locations to ensure privacy and comfort. With consent, discussions were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Supplementary data were drawn from state policy documents, media reports, and election archives to contextualize the findings.

**Data Analysis:** Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach, which involves familiarization, coding, theme identification, and interpretation. Transcripts were read multiple times to capture patterns and contradictions. Initial codes were grouped into broader categories reflecting recurring themes such as pathways to power, negotiation of patriarchy, symbolic representation, and institutional resistance. NVivo 12 software was used to support data organization and retrieval, but coding decisions were guided by interpretive engagement rather than frequency counts. This approach allowed meanings to emerge inductively from participants' narratives, grounded in their lived realities and contextual specificities.

**Ethical Considerations:** Given the sensitivity surrounding gender and religion in Northern Nigeria, strict ethical measures were observed throughout the research process. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, and verbal and written consent were obtained prior to interviews. The researcher was reflexively conscious of her positionality as a female academic researching women in power within a conservative context. While this sometimes-facilitated trust and openness, it also required careful navigation of social boundaries. The researcher ethically emphasized empathy, respect, and non-judgmental engagement throughout the fieldwork process.

**Findings and Discussion:** The findings of this study are organized around four major themes that emerged from the interviews: (1) pathways to power, (2) women agency (3) formal and informal barriers, and (4) strategies for sustaining power. Together, these themes illustrate the complex interplay between structure and agency that defines women's political experiences in Sokoto State.

### **Pathways to Power**

The entry of women into politics in Sokoto State followed multiple, though intersecting, routes shaped largely by networks of patronage and grassroots mobilization. Most respondents emphasized that access to political positions was not necessarily through party structures but rather through networks of patronage.

As one respondent observed, “You must have somebody to introduce you to the men who decide things, even if you are qualified, nobody will hear you without that connection.”

Another respondent added that;

*In this part of the country, it is very difficult for a woman to get into politics without starting from somewhere, you have to know a very influential person that can take you in unlike men who are very free to start from anywhere. Some women start at grassroots level and advance to greater areas of participation but there must be that network and connection to take you through.*

This reflects what Tripp (2015) describes as “the politics of linkage”, where women's entry into governance is mediated by their proximity to power holders rather than by institutional

openness. In Sokoto, several women appointees such as women leader and councilors were selected not through competitive processes but through nomination by male governors or party leaders. This underscores the persistence of clientelist political culture and the centrality of patriarchal gatekeeping.

However, on the part of appointed positions, professional credentials and reputational capital also served as legitimate entry points. Some respondents who were commissioners, Accountant general of the state, permanent secretaries, directors and executive secretaries noted that their qualifications and competency have made them to be where they are. The findings thus reveal that pathways to power for women in Sokoto are negotiated spaces where social credibility intersects with male approval. This hybridity mirrors what Nnaemeka (2004) conceptualizes as nego-feminism; the art of balancing self-assertion with strategic accommodation within patriarchal boundaries.

### **Women Agency**

The literature on women's agency highlights the importance of not only gaining access to power but also exercising power effectively once in office. Women agency here, has to do with capacity of women to strategically act on issues that concerns them or of interest to them. It also has to do with the capacity of women to independently exercise power and influence policy making decisions. Cornwall (2017) and Goetz and Hassim (2003) argue that real empowerment involves the capacity to influence decision-making, rather than merely occupying political positions. While the public narrative often frames women in politics as passive beneficiaries of male patronage, the interviews reveal a more nuanced picture of women agency. Respondents demonstrated considerable resourcefulness in navigating exclusionary structures while maintaining social legitimacy.

For instance, several participants consciously adopted “respectful femininity” as a political strategy such as dressing modestly, invoking religious identity, and framing their leadership as service to community rather than competition with men. This echoes Mahmood's (2005) argument that agency in conservative societies is not necessarily oppositional but may be expressed through embodied practices that align with, rather than reject, social norms. A respondent described her approach as “leading like a mother.” By framing her political role in maternal and moral terms, she gained acceptance among male colleagues who might otherwise perceive her as transgressive. Such symbolic maternalism provided moral legitimacy while subtly expanding the scope of women's participation.

Another respondent said;

*The capacity to exercise agency for a woman in leadership role is determined by her personality. For me, I always make sure that I stay firm and present in every stage of decision making and to speak with substance. I make sure I present myself morally and culturally well also in other to be well respected. Whenever a woman has the capacity to exercise agency, she can actually build very good initiatives and make difference.*

Another respondent added that;

*Yes, women have the capacity to influence decisions but only if the woman realize the potentials in her. Here, when the male counterparts know that you are firm and decisive, some of them will feel you are trying to compete with them but they would still consult you in decision making, not necessarily making the woman as the final decision maker.*

Thus, it could be argued that women agency in Sokoto state also has limits. Many respondents noted that their influence was often “consultative rather than decisive.” While they could contribute to discussions, ultimate decision-making remained in male hands. This asymmetry illustrates Lukes' (1974) third dimension of power which is control over agendas and definitions of legitimacy which remains a major obstacle for women's substantive representation in Sokoto politics.

### **Formal and Informal Barriers**

In Sub-Saharan Africa, formal and informal challenges intensify due to entrenched patriarchal norms, weak gender-sensitive legal frameworks, and political party structures that marginalize women. Bauer and Britton (2006) show that even in countries like Rwanda (with over 60% female parliamentarians), women often lack real power due to elite control and patriarchal political norms. Tamale (1999) in Uganda and Tripp et al. (2009) in various African states document how women appointees are sometimes tokenistic and isolated from policymaking decisions, reinforcing symbolic rather than substantive representation.

In Nigeria, while there has been some non-manifesting increase in the appointment of women to government positions, formal challenges include faced by women in power include lack of legal quotas at national and sub-national levels. Patriarchal party structures that rarely support women's leadership and limited control over budgets and policy direction, especially in male-dominated cabinets (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2013). Informally, women in positions of power encounter social and religious expectations that undermine authority (Oloyede, 2016). According to Oloyede&Omilusi (2020), informal challenges faced by women in power in Nigeria include exclusion from decision-making cliques, stereotyping and delegitimization by male colleagues and the media. A recent study by Akinboye (2021) found that female commissioners and legislators in Nigeria often face “double marginalization” having to constantly prove legitimacy to male peers while also fulfilling culturally expected feminine roles.

A respondent said;

*Although, the price for nomination form is subsidized for women but we do not want that sympathy. What we want is support of the party leaders, the male counterparts and our communities. unfortunately, candidate selection is often determined by male political godfathers and you as a woman will even feel less of a qualified and competent candidate to come out and contest.*

On informal barriers, it was gathered as even more pervasive. Respondents particularly involved directly in politics described bitter experiences of verbal hostility, subtle ridicule, and moral scrutiny. Some were told outright that “politics is not for decent women.” Social expectations about women's domestic roles, coupled with fear of reputational damage, discouraged many from continuation of active political engagement. In addition, religion was also frequently mobilized as a justification for exclusion, though interpretations varied.

A respondent said;

*Any woman that venture into politics must have faced some kinds of harassment and moral scrutiny. In this part of the country, religion is usually misinterpreted to discourage us from participating. Because people use religion to claim that Islamically a woman is not supposed to come out and mingle with men. But that is not true as far as you have protected your chastity you can also aspire for a position. In most cases we face harassment from our family members even before rest of the community. My uncle once said that he does not want to see my face because I am involved in politics. Another discouraging thing is we do not have support of our women counterparts because of pull her down syndrome.*

A religious scholar buttressed the above point by supporting that;

“Islamically, women are allowed to also hold positions of power and demonstrate agency, however, the activities involved in politics which include too much intermingling with men is what is usually questioned because Islam frowns at that.

Notably, women in appointed position do face subtle of forms informal and formal challenges ranging from balancing work and family to male domination in the work place, women who are directly involved in politics in the state have reported overt forms of formal and informal challenges such as religious misinterpretation and harassment that affect their agency and participation. Furthermore, several women pointed out that resistance did not always come from men alone; female community members sometimes reinforced patriarchal values by questioning women's public visibility. This resonates with Cornwall and Goetz's (2005) argument that patriarchy is sustained not only through male dominance but also through the internalization of gender norms across society.

### **Strategies for Sustaining Leadership**

According to Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) argue that women's inclusion in leadership improves governance outcomes, suggesting that women's authority can be impactful if given room to operate. However, once elected, women face additional challenges that require both resilience and strategic acumen. As noted by Tamale (2020), sustaining leadership is often harder than attaining it. The concept of “political mimicry” (Oloyede, 2016) suggests that women sometimes adopt masculine leadership styles to be taken seriously. This aligns with Jamieson's (1995) “double bind” theory, which states that women in power are often criticized

either for being too soft or too assertive. Other studies highlight alternative strategies. Kwesiga (2021) and Tamale (2020) argue that coalition-building and alliance-making are vital for survival in male-dominated parliaments. In contrast, Oloyede (2016) suggests that adopting community-focused governance what she terms “gendered governance” can help women maintain legitimacy and support. On the other hand, Goetz and Hassim (2003), argue that institutional support structures are essential for sustaining women's leadership.

Despite the constraints, women in Sokoto have developed innovative strategies to sustain their leadership and influence policy decisions. Four major patterns emerged: (a) Coalition-Building (b) moral framing, (c) informal diplomacy and mentorship

**(a) Coalition-building:**

Many respondents emphasized the importance of forming alliances with other women and deeply expressed concern over the and lack of coalition building for women in the state. Majority of the respondents including party chairmen interviewed under key informant interviewed have expressed that women are found not supporting women in politics due to jealousy and lack of cooperation between them normally termed as pull her down syndrome.

A respondent said;

*Women need women to support them but the womenfolk do not support us. There is no one single coalition or organization developed support women in Sokoto. While every woman is fighting alone the rest of the womenfolk do not support us because jealousy and the need to support men whom their husbands are supporting.*

The above assertion deeply portrays the need to have coalition building for women to feel strong and supported in the political landscape of Sokoto Sate. Women often worked collectively to advocate for appointments or defend one another against political attacks. These informal solidarities, while fragile, served as a buffer against institutional isolation. This finding aligns with Tripp (2000), who highlights women's coalitional politics in patriarchal systems as critical to sustaining representation.

**(b) Moral framing**

Women often framed their political ambitions around communal service, education, or welfare to align with cultural ideals of nurturing femininity. This moral framing helped reduce hostility and position their leadership as culturally legitimate. Such “gendered moral capital” (Hassim, 2006) served as an alternative source of authority when formal power was limited. This aligns with Oloyede's (2016) argument that women often gain positions through non-threatening roles of service and moral representation that are culturally acceptable. In such cases, women's legitimacy in leadership was derived not from partisan activism but from their perceived virtue and social respectability.

A respondent said;

*As Muslim woman, you have to behave like one anywhere you find yourself. Otherwise, the men will think you are there to challenge them and they will start making all moves to put you back to your place, by frustrating you. Personally, I take my political journey as service to my community, as I go out there as a mother, I do not see me representing myself but my whole community especially women and children.*

Abdullahi (2022) documents how Northern Nigerian women leverage religious networks and philanthropic work to gain political capital, noting that these women often avoid confrontational activism. This resonates with Tripp (2001), who found similar patterns in Uganda and Tanzania, where women employed non-threatening ways to survive in politics.

### **(c) Informal Diplomacy**

Respondents frequently mentioned the need to “manage relationships” with party elders and male politicians through tact, respect, and interpersonal diplomacy. Respondents have made emphasis on the strong belief that in the contextual landscape of the state politics, even a man must know how to manage relationships and networks not to talk of a woman who hardly get a godfather or majority of the men counterparts to support her. Most of the respondents claimed that the inability of party leaders to encourage and support them have actually led to their back off even at the verge of primary election.

A respondent said;

*I have actually done my assignment very well, I did my campaigns and gathered the support of my people. Unfortunately, at the last hour I was called by a highly influential male politician whom I respect a lot and asked to step down for a man and which I did.*

### **(d) Mentorship and symbolic representation:**

Several respondents described mentoring younger women and encouraging civic participation. Although their numbers remain small, these women serve as symbols of possibility in a conservative environment.

As one commissioner reflected, “Our presence itself is an achievement; it tells girls that leadership is not forbidden.” Such symbolic representation may not immediately transform institutions, but it gradually reshapes public perceptions of women's capability and legitimacy. Another respondent added that “I am very passionate about mentoring our younger ones so that the chain should not break, we continue to train them, educate them and sensitize to be ready to make difference.”

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study explicitly underscore that women's political engagement in Sokoto is shaped by a dual reality, pervasive adversity and resilient agency. While institutions remain

structurally patriarchal, women's adaptive strategies to get access to power and demonstrate agency is relational and contextually grounded. Contextually, pathway to power for women is determined by gender. That is, the pathways to power is different for men and women. Findings have revealed that women enter into politics through network of patronage and must work twice as hard as a man to gain legitimacy within the male dominated structures. A recent study by Akinboye (2021) found that female commissioners and legislators in Nigeria often face “double marginalization” having to constantly prove legitimacy to male peers while also fulfilling culturally expected feminine roles.

Furthermore. The few women who have defied the odds to be in power positions have experienced adversities. This however, do not to some extent affect women in appointed position compared the women who are directly involved in politics either by contesting or a position or actively being involved in politics. This is simply because politics is seen as something not rightly fitted for a woman in the socio cultural and religious context of the region. This have further explained the fact that currently, there is no single woman in an elected position in the state but rather nominated position in politics. This could be attributed to the fact women who contest for elections are seen as unchaste and highly exposed as against the traditions and culture of the society.

The study also found that women in power uses survival strategies to gain legitimacy and sustain power. Strategies used are moral framing, symbolic representation, and informal diplomacy. This aligns with Oloyede's (2016) argument that women often gain positions and sustain presence through non-threatening roles of service and moral representation that are culturally acceptable. In such cases, women's legitimacy in leadership was derived not from partisan activism but from their perceived virtue and social respectability. While coalition building is very important, majority of the respondents have complained bitterly that coalition building is non-existent in the state. Tripp (2000) highlights women's coalitional politics in patriarchal systems as critical to sustaining representation. However, lack of coalition building for women in the state plays a major role in promoting “the pull her down syndrome” and lack of support from womenfolk in the state as mentioned by respondents across the interviews. Thus, women's participation in Sokoto politics could be argued to be constrained yet transformative. The fact that women although not in a satisfying percentage have started to occupy positions of power compared to previous times where extremely few numbers of women are in appointed positions. Their experiences illuminate how gendered power operates not only through exclusion but also through the everyday negotiations that sustain women limited but significant presence in political life.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study explored the gendered pathways through which women in Sokoto State access, negotiate, and sustain political power within deeply patriarchal institutions. The findings reveal that although women's formal inclusion in politics remains minimal, their presence however symbolic signifies complex forms of agency exercised within constraint. Rather than outright resistance, women's political agency in Sokoto manifests through negotiation, moral legitimacy, and strategic adaptability.

Women navigate institutional and cultural barriers by leveraging personal networks, invoking religious and moral authority, and engaging in quiet diplomacy. These strategies enable them to survive in a political culture that remains resistant to gender equality while subtly challenging entrenched norms from within. The study therefore underscores that agency in patriarchal contexts should not be measured solely by overt contestation, but also by the capacity to rework existing structures in ways that expand women's participation over time.

The implications of these findings are both empirical and theoretical. Empirically, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of women's political participation in Northern Nigeria, moving beyond deficit narratives to highlight resilience, negotiation, and incremental change. Theoretically, it affirms the relevance of feminist institutionalism as a framework for analyzing gendered power relations in conservative societies.

To advance the cause of women's substantive representation, recommendations as follows have emerged:

- 1. Enforcement of Affirmative Action:** Federal and state governments must demonstrate political will in implementing the 35% Affirmative Action policy and the policy initiative for reserved seats for women should be passed into law. This will promote participation especially at the sub-national level.
- 2. Capacity Building and Mentorship:** Sustained investment in leadership development programs for women is essential. Experienced female leaders should continue to mentor younger women, particularly at local government levels where representation remains weakest.
- 3. Public Sensitization and Religious Dialogue:** Civil society and faith-based organizations should engage religious and traditional leaders to reinterpret gender roles in ways that are compatible with Islamic principles of justice and equality. Such dialogues can help normalize women's leadership and reduce social resistance.
- 4. Education and Economic Empowerment:** Expanding girls' education and women's economic participation remains foundational to sustainable political empowerment. Economic autonomy enhances women's capacity to fund campaigns and assert independence within party systems.

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