



SDN

Women's political participation and representation in the Niger Delta



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SDN supports those affected by the extractives industry and weak governance. We work with communities and engage with governments, companies and other stakeholders to ensure the promotion and protection of human rights, including the right to a healthy environment. Our work currently focuses on the Niger Delta.

Email: info@stakeholderdemocracy.org
Website: www.stakeholderdemocracy.org
Twitter: [@SDNNigerDelta](https://twitter.com/SDNNigerDelta)

Port Harcourt, Nigeria
13A Location Road
Off Tombia Extension Oroazi,
G.R.A. Phase 3, Rivers State
T: +234 (0) 703 1593 783

London, United Kingdom
The Green house
244 -254 Cambridge Heath Road
E2 9DA
T: +44 (0) 203 559 6662

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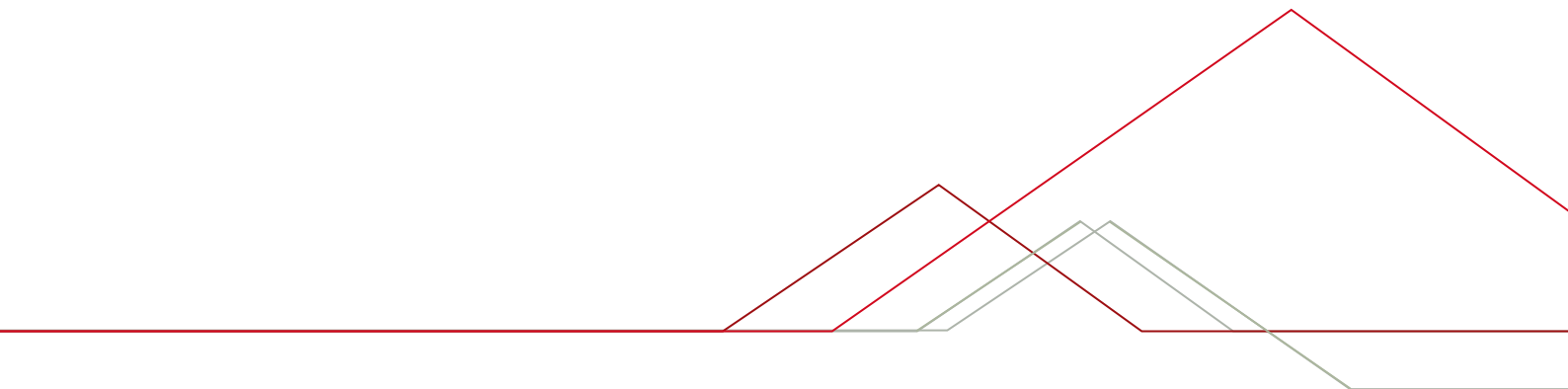


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Abbreviations

APC	All Progressives Congress
CSOs	Civil society organisation
FGD	Focus group discussion
INEC	Independent National Electoral Commission
KII	Key information interview
LGA	Local Government Area
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NWTF	Nigerian Women's Trust Fund
PDP	People's Democratic Party
SDN	Stakeholder Democracy Network

Executive summary

This report assesses the status and trend of women's participation in politics as citizens and as holders of political positions in the Niger Delta. It is based on research undertaken in three states—Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa and Rivers—as part of the More Women in Governance project, led by Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN) in partnership with Nigeria Women's Trust Fund (NWTF), with funding from the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA).

Very limited research exists on women's participation in politics in the Niger Delta, although there is a common, but anecdotal, understanding that women are largely excluded or marginalised in most forms of political participation—for instance, due to high levels of violence, beliefs that women are incapable of performing leadership roles, or because of the personal scrutiny that female political candidates are confronted with. Therefore, the purpose of the research was to assess the status of women's engagement in politics and to understand the reasons for this, in order to better inform the work of SDN and others working on women's participation in politics in the Niger Delta.

Women are severely underrepresented in politics across Nigeria, but the situation in the Niger Delta presents particularly unique challenges. The Niger Delta's large oil and gas resources are a significant source of national revenue, and have shaped politics in the region. Elections are often fiercely and violently contested, as political godfathers, politicians, political parties and other factions seek to control and benefit from resource rents from the industry. These rents, in turn, enable those in power to maintain large patronage networks in order to sustain support. In this sense, the Niger Delta's politics is heavily characterised by money and violence. The Niger Delta also has a recent history of conflict between militant groups and the Federal Government and is now subject to high levels of everyday violent conflict – for example, at the hands of cult groups, which are often involved in political violence themselves. These political contests and violent conflicts are dominated by men.

For this report, desk-based research and election statistics published by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) were combined with civil society consultations, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews across the study locations. Participants included university students and other civil society, politicians and political aspirants, and state INEC officials.

We examined women's political participation in the Niger Delta from two perspectives:

- 1) Participation as citizens;** including as voters, engagement and debate in campaigning, and access to/engagement with party representatives.
- 2) Participation in formal politics;** including as aspirants and candidates in elections, women in elected and appointed positions, and the roles and actions of women in both elected and non-elected positions.

As citizens, we found that women's most visible engagement in politics is during voting. However, they are often mobilised through vote buying, usually with support from a female party member in the position of woman leader. Unfortunately, this interest in women tends to dissipate once the elections are over.

While both the average man and woman in the Niger Delta has limited opportunities to meaningfully engage in politics and with politicians, the situation is worse for women. For instance, when political meetings are held, it is typically men who are invited. Both men and women reported extremely limited opportunities to engage directly with their political representatives. Finally, women participants in the research expressed

their disappointment in current female politicians, whom they feel do not sufficiently support the interests of women at the local level.

In terms of women in politics, our findings confirm that the number of women in elected and appointed political positions is very low at all levels of government. Across the State Houses of Assembly and National Assembly seats for Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa and Rivers, women were elected into 7% of positions. The overarching explanation for this was linked to a societal expectation that women should fulfil domestic roles, while their male counterparts are responsible for decision-making and taking on positions of leadership. This then explained more specifically the limitations related to female aspirants and candidates in elections, including lack of family support, lack of financial means/support, sexual harassment, late night party meetings which exclude women, and electoral violence. And when women are elected or appointed into political roles, these are often into lesser positions with limited capacity to bring about change.

It is perhaps for these reasons, combined with negative public perception of female politicians, that women and girls show little interest in getting into politics. Women in the research suggested community mentorship programmes, led by female politicians, as a means of encouraging more women to aspire into political positions.

Despite poor female representation in politics in the Niger Delta, both male and female participants in the research noted a perceived increase in awareness among women about their voting rights and the political system, as well as the need for more women to enter into politics. Our findings identified that male figures can also be instrumental in promoting female involvement in politics, and there are some positive, if incremental, examples from the Niger Delta. In Rivers, for instance, women have been appointed to all positions of Deputy Chairperson at the local government level. Changes such as this can help to stimulate interest among women in society for more women in politics.

Key findings

How do women engage in politics in the Niger Delta as citizens?

Going to the polls: women's participation in voting

- Women's presence in politics is perhaps most heavily felt in their participation as voters. However, they are often specifically targeted for vote buying by political parties—something which is highly prevalent in the Niger Delta. In this way, female voters are engaged by political parties for a very narrow and instrumental purpose (the purchase of support), and fewer votes are made on the basis of a candidate's credentials and policies.
- On the other hand, the perception among participants in interviews and focus groups was that voter education among women is increasing, and that this is leading to an increase in the number of women participating as voters during elections. However, rural areas—particularly the remote creek areas of the Niger Delta — are not as well reached by these initiatives, which potentially leads to lower turn-out or a higher likelihood of women's votes being manipulated. Unfortunately, statistics do not exist on voter participation by gender.

- The high-levels of male-dominated violence and intimidation experienced in Niger Delta elections, the marginalisation of women from politics, and an associated lack of faith in the electoral system, are significant factors which deter women from voting, or even registering to vote.
- There is a lack of solidarity between female politicians and women in communities, with female participants expressing disappointment in current female politicians. This discourages women from voting for fellow women.

Recommendations:

- A lack of gender-disaggregated voting statistics limits conclusions which can be drawn from the data. Further studies by INEC or research institutions, to gather this data at state or LGA-level, would be extremely valuable in facilitating a better understanding of the gendered dynamics of voter participation.
- INEC and CSOs should increase voter education for women and girls, particularly in rural areas, focusing on voter's rights and advice against vote buying, as well as introducing messaging to counter negative stereotypes associated with women who run for office and promote gender equality.

Having a say: women's engagement in political debate and campaigning

- Women do not typically play central roles in political debate (e.g. organised public discussions) during election periods. This is because it is usually men—not women—who are invited to participate in community meetings. In some communities, women are not even permitted to attend these meetings. As a result, they have limited opportunities to raise their concerns and end up missing out on key decisions taken. This reinforces a belief that women should not engage in political debate. Subsequently, the fact that women's views are hardly heard, even at the community level, limits opportunities for women's needs to be addressed at a higher level.
- Women are routinely mobilised to participate as spectators during campaigns and public engagements. This is usually done by a woman representing the position of woman leader within political parties. During an election, the woman leader invites women to town hall meetings where she sells the party to the women, not on the basis of policy, but by offering gifts in order to elicit their support. Thus, women are deliberately targeted in order to support the agendas of politicians.

Recommendations:

- Political parties should create ample opportunities for women to engage in political debate during the campaigning period—for example, by holding town hall meetings to enable discussions between elected party members and local communities.
- CSOs and the media should increase public debate around the barriers to women's political participation, and implement campaigns that challenge negative stereotypes and promote women's involvement in politics.
- Community heads should ensure that women are invited and encouraged to attend and speak at community meetings.

Getting heard: women’s access to, and engagement with, political representatives

- Women have limited or no access to direct engagement with political representatives, and there was very little awareness about how they might engage with their representatives to address community concerns.
- Both men and women said they lack opportunities for statutory engagement with their representatives on policy and other issues affecting them and their constituencies. Most feel their only opportunity for engagement is during elections, when representatives occasionally visit communities and donate money or gifts with the intention of winning their support. Women, especially widows, often receive more of these visits compared to other members of the community.
- The woman leader is a kind of representative of women in communities. She is supposed to meet with these women on a regular basis and document their challenges, in order to later raise them at party meetings and seek commitments to address them from party members. In reality, however, the woman leader only engages with women during election periods in the nature discussed above (under Having a say: women’s engagement in political debate and campaigning).

Recommendations:

- Representatives should hold regular town hall meetings or another form of engagement through which they can engage with their constituents. These should be inclusive—not just community heads and men, but also women.
- Woman leaders should hold regular meetings with women’s groups—not just during elections—where they update women about party plans and address women’s concerns at the community level.

How do women participate in formal politics as political candidates or office holders in the Niger Delta?

Overall, the research identified that the underlying issue affecting women’s participation in formal politics relates to social gender norms. For example, women are not expected to take on leadership positions or be involved in decision-making. Rather, they are expected to adopt the role of caring for the family and the household. This has subsequent effects which further restrict women’s ability to participate as candidates in elections—these are discussed below.

Table one: Number and percentage of male and female candidates and men and women elected in the 2019 State House of Assembly or the National Assembly in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Rivers states.

	Akwa Ibom	Bayelsa	Rivers	Total
# women candidates	109	54	160	323
# women elected	3	2	3	8
# men candidates	441	431	735	1607
# men elected	36	28	42	106
Total number of candidates	550	485	895	1930
Total number elected	39	30	45	114
% women candidates	20%	11%	18%	17%
% women elected	8%	7%	7%	7%

Getting into politics: women's participation as aspirants and candidates in elections

- Female participation as aspirants and candidates is significantly lower than men across all levels of government. In the 2019 Governorship, State House of Assembly, House of Representatives and Senatorial elections, women accounted for only 17% of candidates in the states observed. Although these numbers are low, the proportion of women running as candidates in Akwa Ibom (20%) and Rivers (18%) is significantly higher than the national average of circa 11%. Yet, this does not result in a higher proportion of women elected.
- Our research identified the following major barriers to women's participation as aspirants and candidates in elections: lack of family support; electoral violence; lack of financial support; late night political meetings; and sexual harassment.
- There is a lack of interest among women to aspire to political positions, as well as a lack of support for female candidates from fellow women. The latter is partly ascribed to the stigma attached to female candidates (for example, that they are assumed to have engaged in sexual favours in order to get their names on to the list of candidates for an election), and partly as a consequence of disappointment among women in current female politicians, including a pervasive feeling that they do not listen to the views of women at the local level.
- Despite this, participants reported a perceived increase in women's political awareness and interest in getting involved in politics in the Niger Delta. This was attributed to an increase in education on voting and elections within the study area.

Recommendations:

- Political parties should apply the proposed 35% affirmative action policy in order to ensure at least 35% of those appearing on primary and final candidate lists are female.
- Political parties and party members should hold meetings at suitable hours for women to attend, in spaces which are safe and convenient for women to access. During these meetings, women should be engaged and encouraged to speak on an equal level to men.
- Political parties should provide free nomination forms and reduce other financial requirements for female political aspirants seeking to participate in primaries.
- CSOs should offer community mentorship programmes to encourage women and girls to aspire into politics and build their capacity to participate as candidates in elections. These programmes should include education about the political system and the roles and responsibilities of different political positions which can be contested for.
- With support from INEC, political parties should agree on a code of conduct for candidates that ensures they use non-violent behaviour and language during their campaigns.

Getting into power: women in elected positions

- The number of women in elected positions in both the national and state assemblies is low in all three states (see Table one). The overall percentage of women elected in the study area—at 7%—is similar to that of the national level.
- Available statistics suggest the number of women in elected positions at the local government level is higher as compared to the state level. For instance, out of 329 councillor positions, 46 women were elected in the 2017 Akwa Ibom State local government elections.
- Where women are elected, they often miss out on the most influential roles—for example, no woman has ever occupied the position of governor.

Recommendation:

- Political parties should ensure that women constitute at least 35% of the total number of candidates on their candidate list for each election, in order to improve the chances of more women being elected.

Working with those in power: women in appointed positions

- The number of women in appointed positions (that is, non-elected positions, such as Special Advisors and Commissioners) is low in all three states, as male party leaders tend to select almost all male politicians into these positions. This continued inequality, male preference, and discrimination against women in politics reinforces current gender inequality in the Niger Delta.
- A position which is always held by a woman within political parties is that of the woman leader. This position is designed to relate to the female electorate in order for their concerns to be addressed in party decision-making. However, participants strongly criticised the position for failing to achieve this objective, arguing that, instead, it is used primarily for the purpose of mobilising women and girls during campaigns in support for male politicians.
- Female participants felt that they have more opportunities in appointed, compared to elected, positions. They emphasised that getting more women into appointed positions would be an effective way of increasing female representation in politics, as this would enable them to build the experience and networks needed to eventually run for elected office. Therefore, the lack of appointments for women further limits their opportunities to succeed in politics.

Recommendation:

- Party leaders should be required to appoint at least 35% women into political positions at the local government, state, and national level. This includes positions such as Special Advisor, Senior Special Advisor, Personal Assistant, Commissioner, and Deputy Chairperson.

Political careers: the roles and actions of women in existing elected or non-elected positions

- Women at the local level expressed a low level of trust for women already occupying political positions. Participants said there are few female politicians championing gender equality issues or who listen to and inspire women and girls at the local level. Instead, women feel that female politicians are more likely to make decisions that align with the interests of the male political elite in order to further their political careers. There was a strong demand from female participants for women already in politics to mentor women at the community level. They believe this will be extremely effective in encouraging more women to aspire into politics.
- As previously highlighted, the position of woman leader in political parties was seen by participants as a means through which politicians can strategically mobilise female voters, rather than representing the female public and their needs in party decision-making. If harnessed properly, this position could provide a key opportunity for engagement with women at the local level.
- Where women have been elected and appointed, they are unlikely to be placed in roles that have a significant influence in government and their parties—for example, no woman has ever occupied the position of Speaker in any of the State Houses of Assembly in the study.

Recommendations:

- Media should amplify the profiles of female politicians by giving them more coverage in all types of media, including print (e.g. news articles), broadcast (e.g. talk shows), and internet.
- Political parties should provide leadership training to female party members. The woman leader, in particular, should provide leadership training to women and girls in communities.

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1. Introduction

The participation of women in politics is a key issue in the global discourse on gender inequality, with female political participation being an essential component of a functioning modern democratic system and assuming great significance for realising human rights.¹ As is the case at the national level, where women represent 6% of all government positions, women in the Niger Delta are significantly underrepresented in political positions and less visible compared to their male counterparts when it comes to citizen engagement in politics—for example, lobbying politicians and participating in public discussion. However, the situation in the Niger Delta is particularly difficult, as political power is largely gained through money and violence, and the region’s political dynamics have been heavily shaped—directly and indirectly —by the contest to control, and benefit from the proceeds of, the region’s oil and gas resources.

This report has been produced as part of SDN’s More Women in Governance project, which aims to promote gender equality in political representation and decision-making in the Niger Delta. It is implemented in collaboration with the Nigeria Women’s Trust Fund (NWTF), with funding from the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA). Along with campaigning, advocacy, and capacity building activities—such as a mentorship programme for young women, a social media and radio campaign, civil society and public consultations, and roundtable discussions with key political stakeholders—a research project was conducted in order to examine the status and trend of women’s engagement in politics in the Niger Delta.



Attendees at a Roundtable Event on More Women in Governance in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, July 2019

The research examined the involvement of women in politics – firstly, as citizens and, secondly, as political aspirants and office holders participating in formal politics in three Niger Delta states: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Rivers. The analysis is based on desk research, 2019 election statistics obtained from INEC, civil society consultations, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews conducted in the three states in May and June 2019, in the aftermath of the 2019 election. As citizens, we examined voter participation, engagement in political debate and campaigning, and access to and engagement with political representatives. As political aspirants and office holders, we looked at women’s participation as aspirants and candidates in elections, women in elected positions, women in appointed positions, and the roles and actions of women in existing elected and non-elected positions. The findings of the research are broken down in this report based on each of these research areas.

2. National context

Nigeria has one of the lowest rates of female representation in parliament across Africa.² Since political independence in 1960, Nigerian women have been heavily excluded from the political process.³ Nigerian women currently occupy less than 6% of these positions⁴ and remain less likely to be elected into executive political positions.⁵ This section provides a brief history of women's political participation in Nigeria leading up to the present day, followed by a summary of the existing knowledge on challenges confronting women who enter into the political system.

2.1 A brief history of women's political participation in Nigeria

Nigerian women have a history of struggle for inclusion in governance and public decision-making in a male-dominated environment.⁶ However, there are a number of poignant examples where women have played key roles in society as activists, campaigning on political issues. Between 1947 and 1948, women campaigned against the imposition of unfair taxation by the Nigerian colonial government in the Abeokuta Women's Revolt (or the Egba women's tax riot). During the colonial era, women also campaigned for more participation of indigenous people in governance.⁷ Additionally, in the 1950s, the Women's Movement, formed in 1952 and led by Elizabeth Adekogbe in the Ibadan area of Nigeria, specifically explored ways in which women could take advantage of political and constitutional changes under the colonial state against the backdrop of an expected independence.

Between 1960 and 1999, the number of women in political positions at the national level had increased by only 2%. At independence in 1960, there were only four female politicians nationally, constituting 3% of total government positions. In 1999, the new civilian regime began promoting women's involvement in governance and appointed four women, out of a total 29 ministers, into political positions. Some women were offered the office of senior special adviser and special assistants. This increased the number of female political office holders at the national level to 5%.⁸ Since then, there has only been a small improvement in the number of women in political positions, and the presence of women in elected and appointed political office is still substantially lower than men.⁹ Between 1999 and 2015, there were only six female deputy governors across Nigeria. To date, no woman has ever held the position of governor.

Since the 1995 Beijing Declaration, which promoted equal opportunities for men and women, several countries have experienced an improvement in public awareness of female political participation. However, the changes are slow, and women are still widely underrepresented in decision-making. While the current outlook for female political participation in Nigeria is not promising, women have a great opportunity if the initial barrier can be broken enabling women's entry into politics. Women constitute almost half of the population nationally, and have a significant ability to mobilise at the grassroots level, as women's associations—such as market women, traders and craftswomen—have huge existing grassroots and informal associations that can serve as the foundation for female political movements.¹⁰

2.2 Policy, legislation, and institutions for gender equality

Nigeria is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Political Rights of Women and the 1995 Beijing Declaration. These are key international instruments for ensuring that governments create space for women in politics. At the regional level, Nigeria was party to the 1985 Nairobi Conference on Forward-Looking Strategies for

the Advancement of Women;¹¹ the 2004 Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa; and the 2003 Maputo Protocol, otherwise known as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights. At the national level, Nigeria’s National Gender Policy was implemented in 2008, which acknowledges women’s rights to equality in economic, social, and political life, and promises to increase the percentage of women in elected and appointed political positions to 35%¹²—although this is yet to be actualised. In addition, Nigeria’s Ministry of Women Affairs works towards gender inclusivity in the development process.¹³

2.3 Women in governance in 2019

The following figures illustrate the number of women in political positions in Nigeria after the 2019 elections. Currently, men represent 94% of all political leadership at the national level, compared to 6% of women. This number outstandingly fails Nigeria’s commitment to have 35% of women in parliament.

Table two: Number of men and women in political positions nationally in 2019¹⁴

Office	Women	Men	Total number of seats
State House of Assembly	37 (4%)	622 (94%)	659
Houses of Representatives	23 (6%)	337 (94%)	360
Senate	8 (7%)	101 (93%)	109
Total	68 (6%)	1060 (94%)	1128

Evidently, women did not do well in the 2019 elections. Nigeria’s recent projected population is 200,923,640.¹⁵ Out of this, women constitute 99,180,412, representing 49% of the total population. A total of 2,970 women contested the elections, constituting 11% of all candidates. However, only 57 of them (4% of all elected candidates) were elected. There were six women who contested for presidency in 2019 (in contrast to one woman in 2015). There were 22 women in the 2019 vice-presidential race, representing 30% of all candidates for this office.

Table four depicts the number and percentage of female candidates who contested the various (2019) elections in Nigeria in relation to the number elected.

Table three: Female candidates in the 2019 Nigerian elections¹⁶

Office	Female candidates	Percentage women	Total number of candidates	Number elected
State House of Assembly	1,825	13%	14,583	37
Senate	235	12%	1,904	6
House of Representatives	533	11%	4,680	11
Deputy Governor	275	11%	2,412	4

All six women who contested the presidential race stepped down during the campaign. Female governorship candidates constituted a marginal 3% of all candidates running for that post. While no woman won the governorship race, the position of deputy governor is currently held by a woman in four Nigerian states: Enugu, Kaduna, Ogun and Rivers. However, this figure was higher in 2015, when women were elected as deputy governor in six states.

2.4 Challenges faced by women in politics

The underrepresentation of women in Nigerian politics has been linked to the broader marginalisation of women in society.¹⁷ As is the case in many other countries, there is a social norm in Nigeria where women are viewed as subordinate to men, which is reinforced by some religious beliefs that women should not preside over men.¹⁸ Male-dominated political party structures do not provide opportunities for women, who are also constrained from participating in politics due to economic and social factors (such as expectations to be at home for child care). Meanwhile ongoing violence and intimidation in Nigerian elections acts as a deterrent to both female aspirants and voters.¹⁹ These factors collectively contribute to the negative perceptions of politics among women, thus discouraging them from aspiring to political careers.²⁰

The Nigerian political system is designed in such a manner that it does not accommodate women.²¹ For example, in the run up to an election, political parties hold midnight meetings, which candidates are expected to attend, for the purpose of strategizing and mapping out campaigns. Those who do not attend these meetings miss out on key opportunities to be involved in these discussions; as a result, they are constrained from fully participating as candidates during the election period.²² As women within Nigerian society are expected to remain at home to fulfil their responsibilities for the household, such as child care, many women are unable to attend these meetings. Consequently, many women view this as a tactic by men to deter them from contesting elections and, subsequently, impeding their access into politics.²³

There are many negative labels associated with women who participate in politics in Nigeria.²⁴ There is a general perception and negative stereotype that female politicians are promiscuous and, if married, will be unfaithful to their partners. They are viewed as irresponsible and shameless for 'abandoning' their homes at strange hours to attend the midnight political party meetings, and are accused of prostitution if seen out during these hours.²⁵ This negative perception of women who participate in politics may explain why female candidates in the past have tended not to receive a lot of support from the female electorate²⁶. For example, during the 2003 elections, women constituted 60% of all registered voters; thus, they had a strong opportunity to vote collectively for female candidates. Yet, women voted overwhelmingly for male candidates.²⁷

Nigerian women often must gain their husband's consent before entering into politics.²⁸ However, many Nigerian men are reluctant to allow their wives to participate as aspirants in elections, making this another barrier to women's political participation in the country. In one study, 52% of survey respondents said that they would not allow their wife to participate in politics, citing both fear of infidelity and concern for their wife's safety.²⁹ In general, women are fearful of the violence, ruthlessness, and corruption that are characteristic of Nigerian politics. This, in turn, discourages women—as well as many men—from contesting elections.³⁰

In Nigeria, both male and female political aspirants sometimes gain support from 'Godfathers'. These are powerful male political figures who support aspirants in their campaigns for political positions. Money is often involved in this arrangement, and women who have sought support from Godfathers have often been successful. However, there is an overall negative perception of Godfathers in politics, among both men and women, as Godfathers are believed to exert high levels of influence on their candidates after being elected into office.

Nigerian politics requires many financial resources (from application fees, to 'gifts' for key party officials, to legitimate campaigning activities), and men in Nigeria generally have greater financial stability compared to women.³¹ It has been argued that money is more important to candidates than political supporters in terms of winning votes, as votes can be bought—and often are.³² In 2011, it was reported that many female aspirants were abandoned by their supporters because male politicians had more financial resources to win over the electorate.³³ Female voters are often pressured into casting their votes for certain (mostly male) candidates, particularly in rural areas where poverty is high and voter education is low.³⁴ SDN's own observation of elections suggests that women, in particular, appear to be targets of vote buying during campaigns.*

* SDN conducted a complete analysis of the 2019 Nigerian general elections based on its own election observation activities. The report is accessible at: www.stakeholderdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/NDWatch19-16.07.19-DT-smaller.pdf

3. Niger Delta context

The Niger Delta is located in south eastern Nigeria and is typically considered to include nine Nigerian states—Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers—although other definitions are restricted to the six states in the South-South political zone (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers), or what are known as the “core” Niger Delta states (Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers) which have historically been responsible for the majority of oil production and worst affected by the negative ramifications associated with the exploitation of oil and gas resources (such as pollution and conflict). The region consists of a mix of densely populated urban centres (Port Harcourt in Rivers State is Nigeria’s third largest city) and remote rural and riverine areas that are difficult to access. Being the country’s major oil producing region, the Niger Delta has particular significance at the national level, contributing significantly towards national income and foreign exchange earnings.

3.1 Oil, degradation, and conflict

The presence of the oil and gas industry since the 1950s, and dependence on the revenue it generates, have been important factors in shaping the political, social, and economic dynamics of the region. Despite the large revenues generated by the industry, most of those living in the Niger Delta have seen little benefit of its wealth; for example, public services and infrastructure are typically poor, especially in remote creek areas, as vast amounts of public funds have been mismanaged or diverted for private benefit. As a consequence, people living in the Niger Delta have borne the brunt of decades of pollution from oil spills and gas flares, high unemployment, and government mismanagement, which are linked to over-dependence on, and poor governance of, the country’s natural resources.

Stop-start conflicts between the Federal Government and militant groups since the 1990’s have, in part, been fuelled by legitimate grievances over the aforementioned issues, as well as by the harsh and indiscriminate military crackdowns in response to both peaceful and non-peaceful resistance. However, conflict and insecurity in the region has also been fuelled by a violent contest to capture the wealth benefits of the oil and gas industry—be it through militancy, politically-sponsored violence during elections, or everyday clashes between criminal groups, for instance, to control security contracts or the artisanal oil industry in their local areas.

This dynamic means politics in the Niger Delta can be particularly violent, and different groups and individuals vie to control major oil producing states (historically, Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers). They are heavily dependent on maintaining patronage networks using the direct or indirect proceeds of the oil and gas industry (for example, to pay off groups used to commit acts of violence to interfere with elections, or to fund vote buying). Notable in all of this, is the apparent absence of women—militant groups, political factions and local gangs are largely male dominated. However, this is not to say that women have no influence or role to play—women have been found to hold certain positions in these groups—but that men have tended to be the ones in leadership positions that have brought about the region’s current political and economic dynamics.

In 2015 and 2019, it is worth noting one additional dynamic, which is that the region has largely been controlled by the opposition, People’s Democratic Party (PDP). This has created another fault line in the contest to control the region, between the incumbent party at the state level in the Niger Delta (PDP) and the ruling All Progressives Congress party (APC) at the federal level.

3.2 Women in politics in the Niger Delta

The view of women in society in the Niger Delta is based upon religious beliefs that, with men as the heads of the household, women should be relegated to playing supportive roles to them. Women are expected to remain in the background, hidden from society—in some communities, women are not even permitted to attend community meetings. These views state that a woman's place is in the home, where her job is to sustain the household and care for her family. Usually, women lack the funding to be able to get involved in politics, because any money they do have is invested into their household—rather than being saved to pay for candidacy and an electoral campaign. This puts women at a disadvantage to men in terms of opportunities to get into politics.

Consequently, as is the situation at the national level, female political participation in the Niger Delta is very low. Table five shows the number of male and female candidates who contested the various 2015 elections in the three Niger Delta states under study.

Table four: Number of female and male candidates in the Niger Delta states that participated in the 2015 Presidential, State House of Assembly, Senatorial, and House of Representatives elections.³⁵

State	Female	Male
Abia	7	37
Akwa Ibom	6	27
Bayelsa	3	17
Cross River	2	26
Delta	17	45
Edo	1	35
Imo	17	76
Ondo	8	36
Rivers	6	50

4. Methodology

The research focused on three Niger Delta states: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa and Rivers. Analysis covered the period from the previous general election, in 2015, to the latest election cycle in February and April 2019. A combination of primary and secondary data was used. Secondary data included a desk review of relevant academic and grey literature at the regional, national and international level. Academic literature on the subject specific to the Niger Delta was limited, while grey literature included reports from NGOs and CSOs, election observers (e.g. Civil Society Situation Room), government and international organisations, as well as national policy and legislation.³⁷ Election statistics, published by INEC, of candidates and results from the various 2019 elections, were also compiled. This was inclusive of the Presidential, Governorship, House of Representatives, Senatorial, and State House of Assembly elections. Primary qualitative data was generated from a series of interviews and focus group discussions, which are discussed further below.

The three target states were selected for practical reasons. Rivers State is the focus of SDN's More Women in Governance project, and we aim to expand the project to Bayelsa and Akwa Ibom in the future. However, this mix of states is also useful from a research perspective, as they share typical characteristics (such as the overall low level of female representation in politics) but also have differences in key characteristics which have shaped politics in the region. For example, Bayelsa and Rivers have a long history of oil production and pollution and oil-related conflict, whereas Bayelsa's geography is significantly more rural and characterised by large areas of remote and difficult-to-access creeks. Bayelsa is also less economically developed compared to Rivers. Furthermore, while Akwa Ibom has not been as affected by onshore oil production in the past compared to the other two states, it has recently become Nigeria's largest oil producing state due to a surge in offshore production and the ceding of offshore concessions from Cross Rivers to Akwa Ibom State.

Field activities were undertaken between May and June 2019, in the post-election period, and involved 172 participants in total (see Table two). While we intended for the number and type of participants to be consistent across all three states, we had a slightly higher number of participants in Rivers and a slightly lower number in Akwa Ibom.

Table five: Primary data collection

Activity	Quantity	Participant type	Total number of participants	Female participants	Male participants
CSO consultations	3 (1 per state)	Local CSO members	31	Akwa Ibom: 5 Bayelsa: 6 Rivers: 6	Akwa Ibom: 3 Bayelsa: 6 Rivers: 6
Interviews	13	Party representatives, appointed and elected political office holders, INEC state representatives	13	Akwa Ibom: 2 Bayelsa: 2 Rivers: 3	Akwa Ibom: 1 Bayelsa: 2 Rivers: 3
Focus group discussions	12 (4 per state)	University students, community youth, men, women	128	Akwa Ibom: 14 Bayelsa: 24 Rivers: 24	Akwa Ibom: 21 Bayelsa: 21 Rivers: 24

CSO consultations were conducted with a mix of male and female participants from local organisations working on issues relating to women, gender, political participation, and policy. From these, key actors and groups were identified within each state along with their level of interest and influence in promoting or limiting women’s involvement in politics in the Niger Delta. In addition, the sessions looked at barriers and enablers to women’s political participation, and attempted to identify state-level initiatives that have been employed to address these issues.

Four focus group discussions were conducted in each state. These included two single-gender groups—one with only men and one with only women—and two mixed groups—one with university students and one with community youth. Focus groups consisted of 8-12 participants. University students in each state were selected from at least two universities within reach of the state capital. Community men and women were identified from a pool of contacts that SDN has interacted with in the states.

A total of 13 key informant interviews were conducted with a mix of male and female participants, including appointed and elected political office holders, political party representatives, and INEC officials. Interviewees were selected based on pre-existing contacts.

5. Findings

This section of the report presents and discusses the findings of the research in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Rivers states. The analysis is structured based on the research questions, and is therefore divided into two main sections. This includes section one on how women engage in politics as citizens, and section two, which looks at how women participate in formal politics, including as aspirants in elections and political office holders by election and appointment. Each section is divided based on the sub-categories defined in the methodology (chapter two of this report).

5.1 Women as citizens: how do women engage in politics in the Niger Delta?

5.1.1 Going to the polls: women's participation in voting

As gender disaggregated voting statistics were unavailable, we were unable to draw overall conclusions about whether or not there are differences between men and women's voting behaviour and the nature of these. We were, however, able to ask participants in the focus groups and interviews about their perception of voter turnout as well as women's voting behaviour. Our findings are presented here.

5.1.1.1 Women as supporters

One of the most significant dynamics emphasised by research participants was that women are more active in politics through playing supportive roles. This was described by a female activist who participated in the research:

“ ...for now, in Bayelsa state, we are more of supporters in the political sphere. We are not contesting an election as a woman compared to the men. Because, if you look at it now, we are going into local government elections but hardly before [would] you see any women contesting for any of the posts, even the councillorship, because of the barriers that are there. So, we just support; we play a supporting role in the political aspect right now.* ”

This situation was reflected across the study area.

Participants highlighted how women are mobilised as voters during elections. Before an election, political candidates, which are mostly men, depend on women in senior positions to secure support from the female electorate. This is often done through vote buying, which has been found to specifically target women and other vulnerable groups**, and was particularly widespread in both the 2015 and 2019 elections in the Niger Delta. In this manner, women's participation is highly instrumentalised by political parties and candidates to secure support, which may be an important factor in increasing female voter turnout. This trend was described by one participant as follows:

* KII with female activist in Bayelsa State.

** SDN's 2019 election observation activities identified that a significantly higher number of incidents relating to vote buying involved women. See page 21 of Niger Delta Watch 2019: <https://www.stakeholderdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/NDWatch19-16.07.19-DT-smaller.pdf>

“ I think from 2011, women have been involved in elections, but their roles have been passive...women are being used, because they do not know their rights and power that they have, they need to understand the strength they have. If a woman wants to contest an election, their fellow women do not support them and so they are being used; they can mobilize from the hinterland and give you the number you want to win elections.* ”

A female participant in Bayelsa State ascribed women’s compliance to vote buying in Ogbia LGA to the following: “[Women] feel that this is the money we see today, we may not see it for the next four years, we may not even see the person again. So, when they are induced with money, they take it”.** This point is indicative of an awareness among women of their role in elections and the likelihood that they will be forgotten about once the elections are over.

5.1.1.2 Preference for male or female candidates

Even when there are female politicians to vote for, women who participated in the research highlighted that they often prefer to vote for male politicians. Female politicians who participated in the study also complained that they often do not receive support from fellow women during elections. This is discussed in other sections, but essentially relates to a perceived lack of support from female politicians for the priorities of their female constituents. Another potential reason is the negative stereotypes associated with women who have political careers. Participants in Rivers State pointed out that women are more likely to vote for female candidates who have previous experience with leadership and have used their position to support women.

Women also demonstrated a lack of faith in male politicians, and the feeling that the absence of a candidate to vote for leads many women to choose not to vote at all. In Bayelsa, for example, women said they are easily discouraged by the poor behaviour of male politicians. They also expressed a more general lack of faith in the electoral system, perceiving that voting does not matter when it comes to winning elections (most likely because of election rigging). This is likely to be another factor that suppresses the female vote.

5.1.1.3 (In)security and voter turnout

Insecurity—particularly violence—during the election period was repeatedly cited as a key factor in reducing female voter participation; although further research is needed to assess whether this affects female participation more than male participation, or whether insecurity suppresses both the male and female vote equally. However, participants in the current research perceived women to be less involved in violence during elections as compared to men—one participant opined, “It affects mostly the women, because men can hijack ballot boxes and run away with them...very few women are actually that way”***. Methods such as ballot box snatching are used to sway the outcome of the polls.

* FGD with community people in Akwa Ibom State.

** KII with female activist in Bayelsa State.

*** FGD with university students in Bayelsa State.

In Bayelsa, the 2015 elections were believed to have had much higher female voter participation compared to 2019. This was attributed to increased politically motivated security issues during the 2019 elections, which, in turn, deterred women from turning out to vote and participating in campaign events. In this regard, one participant said: *“in 2019, even before the elections, women did not come out to vote due to militarisation”*.^{*} In contrast, female voter participation in Rivers State was believed to have increased since 2015. Whilst there were severe examples of political violence and interference in 2019 (including the highest number of fatalities in any state), the APC, which is the main opposition party in Rivers state, was unable to field a governorship candidate following factional splits and a court ruling. This meant that levels of violence and disruption were lower than feared, and contributed to a feeling of relative safety and determination to vote.^{**}

5.1.1.4 Improvements in voter education

Despite the aforementioned issues, there was a general feeling among research participants that positive changes are taking place across all three states. There is an overall perception that women are becoming more politically aware, mainly due to improvements in access to voter education. An increase in the number of women who understand their rights as voters and how the political system functions means that more women are realising the value in each vote and may work to decrease the number of women who sell their votes during elections. The importance of an increase in voter education, particularly in the previously neglected remote rural and riverine areas, was also noted as crucial in increasing political engagement.

5.1.2 Having a say: women’s engagement in political debate and campaigning

In order to understand how women might be involved in setting and influencing the political agenda, we asked participants about the ways in which women are involved in political debate and campaigning. In terms of political debate, we refer to invitation to, attendance of, and participation in arranged public formal discussions on political issues. We found that women in the Niger Delta are rarely involved in political debate during elections, as they are usually not expected—and in some communities, not even permitted—to be present. This reinforces the view that it is



A group of attendees of the Young Women Ambassador Workshop working on a sample campaign speech & manifesto

not a woman’s place to discuss politics. This was highlighted by some participants, who said that women often do not feel it is their place, or have the confidence, to speak about political issues, because traditional gender stereotypes suggest that this is the responsibility of men—it is men who are invited to attend and participate in political discussions and men who occupy the political sphere. Consequently, this limits opportunities for women’s views to be heard and have their needs addressed by politicians.

^{*} CSO consultation in Bayelsa State.

^{**} FGD with community groups in Rivers State.

5.1.2.1 Women as spectators

Women’s engagement during campaigns and other public engagements takes the form of mass mobilisation of women by party members to facilitate their participation as spectators. One participant referred to women’s involvement in this manner as “*the passive crowd*”.* Women also mobilise women for rallies in support for, usually male, politicians, which led participants to feel that women tend to play a rather relegating supportive role in elections. As one participant noted,

“ *Women are very good at mobilising—like in Bayelsa, here, when you come for elections you see women, they can mobilise, they go down to the grassroots and bring out people that they will use for the elections.* * ”

Within political parties, the position of woman leader is typically responsible for increasing female participation in campaigns. Participants noted that male politicians recognise the value in gaining support from women during an election—as women constitute nearly half of the voting population—and therefore try to gain support from women in communities through women in senior positions (this is discussed further in Section 5.2). Despite the fact that women play this supportive role during campaigns, we found they are often left behind by politicians once the elections have ended.

5.1.2.2 Women as activists

Female activists may be a limited part of the political process, yet there are instances where women are instrumental in their communities in campaigning for political issues and influencing the political agenda. During the 2019 elections in Rivers State, women led peaceful protests against what they viewed as improper military presence in the state. In Okrika, five women, now colloquially referred to as the G-5, led a protest against military interference in the elections. Through participating in vigils in Okrika and Ogu-Bolo LGAs, they denounced insecurity. In this manner, women were able to intervene without the situation escalating to violence, as it may have done with men. This could be because security services did not want to be seen attacking women, which might indicate that women’s greater involvement in political debate and campaigning can potentially bring about change in ways that male-dominated political engagement might not, and that women are more likely to lead successful non-violent campaigns as compared to their male counterparts.

Participants in Bayelsa and Akwa Ibom believe that women’s participation as campaigners and activists is improving. In Akwa Ibom, participants put this down to increasing political education and sensitisation of women, based on efforts by NGOs and the Gender Desk at INEC, aimed at creating more awareness around the need for more women to be involved in elections. This includes the emergence of local gender activists involved in door-to-door campaigns, rallies, and elections.

5.1.3 Getting heard: women’s access to, and engagement with, political representatives

Participants were asked about the extent of their engagement with political representatives. Here, we refer to direct, non-public engagements between politicians and their constituents. Women reported having limited or no access to or engagement with political representatives. Furthermore, when they do, this is mostly with the intention of supporting a political agenda.

* FGD with university students in Bayelsa State.

** FGD with university students in Bayelsa State.

5.1.3.1 Lack of opportunities for engagement

Political representatives are supposed to hold regular town hall meetings to engage their constituents. However, in reality, these often do not hold. Instead, if and when representatives wish to gather opinions from community members, they do so via surveys. When individuals have community needs, they raise these with community leaders. The community leader will then escalate the problem to another senior individual who is able to raise the issue with the representative.

In all three states, both women and men reported having no entrenched practice of engaging political representatives. As a result, they lack opportunities to engage representatives on key policy issues.* While this is a problem for both genders, participants reported that a lack of knowledge among women in particular about the political process means that many women lack the confidence to engage with political representatives in the first place. Consequently, many women in the Niger Delta are unable to exercise their political rights. This lack of engagement further contributes to the pre-existing state of women's exclusion from political debate.

The woman leader is viewed as a kind of representative for women in communities. The person occupying this role is supposed to represent women at the local government level, meeting with women on a regular basis to address their concerns in order to relay these to her party members during meetings and gain commitments to resolve these issues. In reality, this only happens during election periods, leading female participants in the research to criticise the role of woman leader for only being interested in rallying support from the female electorate in the run up to an election.



A member of the More Women in Governance Project team addresses attendees at a Town Hall meeting at Obio/Akpor Local Government Area

* CSO consultation and FGD with women, men and students in Bayelsa State.

5.1.3.2 Community level exclusion

At the community level, when opportunities do arise to engage with political representatives, men are generally preferred over women to do so. One participant, who is a community activist, described her experience of this situation as follows:

“ *Women are not allowed to make decisions; they are consciously denied the role of decision making even now. [...] When it comes to being involved and wanting to be heard outside of [the local] level...we were all saying the same thing, but when you need to go and speak on behalf of your people at, say, government level, at Abuja level, it became difficult. [...] It's always men and very few women.** ”

The example above demonstrates deeply entrenched hierarchical issues within communities and the way in which they limit the ability of women to engage with politicians and discuss community concerns even when there are opportunities for engagement.

5.1.3.4 Vote buying

During election periods, political party representatives will visit constituencies and donate gifts and money to the women. Women, particularly those who are poor, are deliberate targets for money and gift giving activities along with other vulnerable groups (such as orphans, the elderly, and the poor) during campaigning periods, when politicians and parties are trying to gain support in an election. After elections and during periods leading up to seeking re-election, politicians also provide skills training (such as sewing) for some women along with equipment in order to support women in setting up their own businesses. This was viewed by female participants as an opportunity for politicians to get women to support them.

These visits could provide a key opportunity for representatives to capture the needs of local women, which could later be discussed at party meetings. Unfortunately, participants noted that this rarely or never happens. Instead, the visits take place without any sense of what political leaders can do to enable long-term economic and social development solutions in their constituencies. Moreover, such visits do not provide legitimate opportunities for people to engage them constructively on issues of governance and representation. Thus, political representatives take particular advantage of those who are poor as a way to make gains for themselves in their political careers and for their parties.

* KII with female activist in Rivers State.

5.2 Women as politicians: how do women participate in formal politics in the Niger Delta?



Attendees at a Town Hall meeting at Obio/Akpor Local Government Area

5.2.1 Societal expectations of women

“ Having joined, well, it is a man’s world, whether we like it or not. And I was looking at the analysis, even going through the Bible; when God created man, there was no woman. Meetings were held, no women were represented. And, for me, I believe, because they value my capacity, they gave me that trust, and if it were not for this, I would not have won. They came all out. The female chiefs, the youth, they gave me massive support. Even though some men felt, ‘why must it be a woman to lead us?’ - to some, it was almost impossible. I saw men that left the party, just because a woman was running. * ”

This description of one female politician’s experience in politics in the Niger Delta clearly demonstrates that the issue of low female political representation is longstanding and deep rooted. As noted by one female participant, ‘men have been in the room longer than women’. This significant absence of women in politics was attributed to the fact that, unlike men, women’s role in society is not considered to be one of leadership, but rather as carers for the family and the household. Many women said they consider venturing into politics as overstepping the boundaries of their role in society.

Participants emphasised the presence of a male-dominated culture in Nigeria, where women are viewed as being subordinate to men. In this regard, one female participant said, ‘men believe women are not capable’ and ‘men still believe that women are not supposed to be involved [in politics]’.** Responses from men who participated

* Interview with male politician in Bayelsa State

** KII with female politician in Akwa Ibom State

in the research supported these views— ‘Even God made man first. The woman was an afterthought, taken from the ribs of the man. But men don’t have to abuse this position.’* This inequality continues when women get into politics, as we found that women have limited visibility compared to men during campaign speeches and are hardly even permitted to speak at party meetings.** These kinds of views demotivate women from getting more involved in politics, and we found this to be the underlying factor contributing to many of the challenges that women face as political aspirants, candidates, and office holders in the Niger Delta.

At all levels of government, female participation as aspirants and candidates in elections is significantly lower than men. Participants identified a number of barriers to this, including lack of family support, electoral violence, lack of financial support, late night political party meetings, and sexual harassment. These factors both prevent and deter women from aspiring to political positions.

The following analysis first examines gender-disaggregated candidate statistics published by INEC for the 2019 elections, looking at the national (house of representatives and senatorial) and state (governorship and state house of assembly) level elections. This is then followed by an analysis of the key barriers identified to female participation as aspirants and candidates in elections in the Niger Delta.

5.2.1.1 2019 candidate statistics

Table six illustrates the number of candidates disaggregated by gender and state that participated in the 2019 national assembly, governorship, and state house of assembly elections in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Rivers states. Note that the governorship election in Bayelsa State is off-cycle and is therefore not captured in statistics for the February-March 2019 elections.

Table six: All candidates in the 2019 National Assembly, Governorship, and State House of Assembly elections in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Rivers States, disaggregated by gender

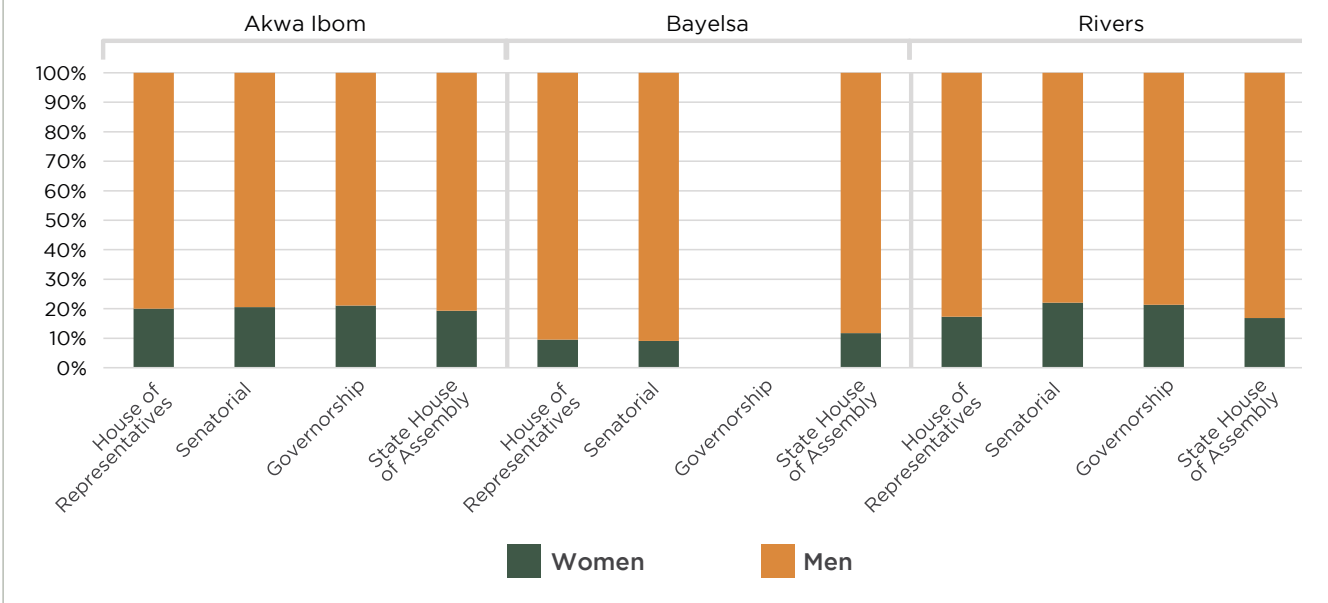
Gender	House of Representatives		Senatorial		Governorship		State House of Assembly		Total	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Akwa Ibom	19	76	7	27	19	71	64	267	109 (20%)	441 (80%)
Bayelsa	8	76	4	40	-	-	42	315	54 (11%)	431 (89%)
Rivers	27	129	13	46	26	96	94	464	160 (18%)	735 (82%)
Total	54	281	24	113	45	167	200	1046	323 (17%)	1607 (83%)

* Interview with political office holder in Bayelsa State.

** CSO consultation.

These figures indicate that women constitute less than 20% of candidates running for elected positions. The proportion of women running for political positions is particularly low in Bayelsa (11%) as compared to Rivers and Akwa Ibom.

Figure one: Proportion of men and women contesting the various 2019 elections in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Rivers states



There is a striking level of consistency in the proportion of women who compete for different political positions within states. Figures two and three show that the proportion of women competing for state and federal-level positions is exactly the same. This indicates that higher or lower political participation as candidates within the three states tends to be visible across the range of elected positions —i.e. there is no obvious preference to run for particular positions among women, or women do not appear to be particularly deterred from running for any particular position.

Figure two: Number of male and female candidates in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Rivers who contested the 2019 House of Representatives and Senatorial elections.

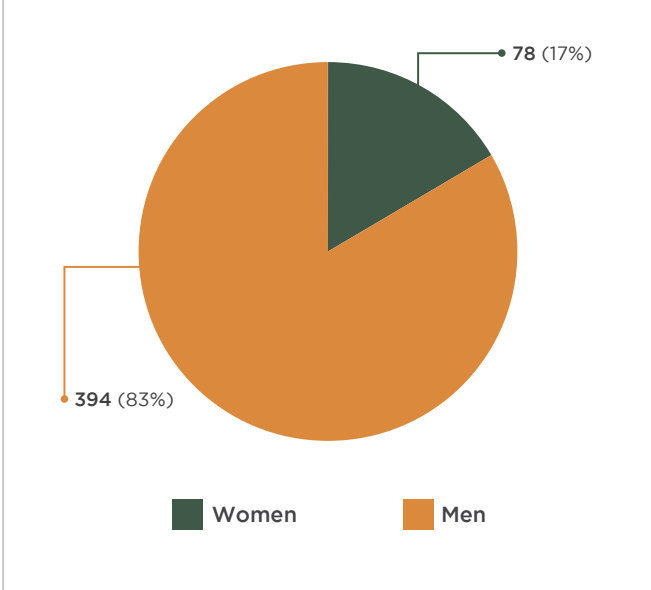
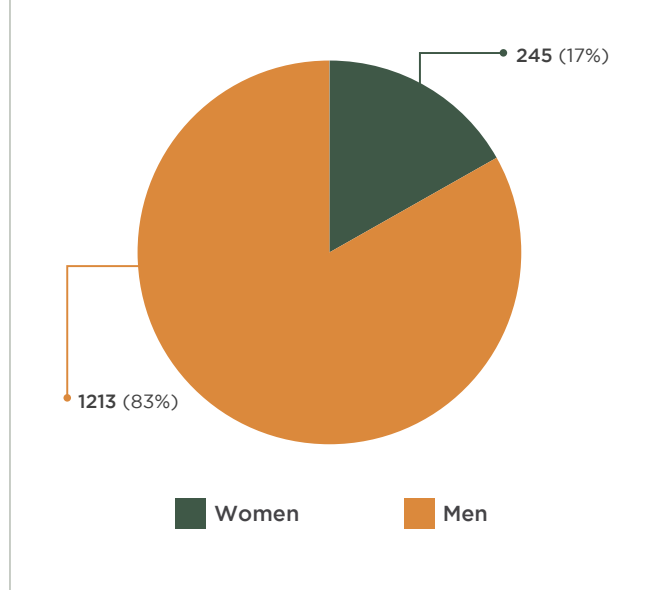


Figure three: Number of male and female candidates who contested the Governorship and State House of Assembly elections in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Rivers states in 2019



Participants in Bayelsa indicated that the number of women contesting the senatorial elections was higher in 2019 in comparison to 2015. This was also the case in Rivers State, which had more than double the number of female candidates contesting the senatorial elections in 2019 compared to 2015, while the number of male candidates remained more or less the same. This is a positive indication that women's participation as candidates in elections in the Niger Delta in may be improving.

In all cases presented in the data above, men significantly outnumbered women as candidates in the 2019 elections.

5.2.1.2 Barriers to women's participation as aspirants and candidates

Data collected through interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders in the three states identified five main barriers, which are interlinked, to women's participation as aspirants and candidates in elections held in the Niger Delta. These barriers are discussed below.

Lack of family support

The decision by women to run in an election is often contested by their families and partners. Many husbands discourage their wives from running and, usually have the power to prevent this due to household gender relations, as women are often dependent on their husbands to fund their campaigns. Men are fearful of their wives being caught up in electoral violence. They are also fearful of infidelity—as female candidates often receive inappropriate requests from male politicians in return for helping them in their campaign for an elected position. One male participant, who is a politician in Bayelsa State, contended that *“women are supposed to be wives to men. It is not every man that would permit his wife to be in politics. You know, men are more jealous than women. Women in politics are mainly unmarried”*.^{*} As a result of this stigma, many men think that allowing their wife to run in an election will bring shame upon the family.

Men are also largely dependent on their wives to fulfil domestic duties, and may not permit them to attend political meetings and activities; especially late night party meetings. There are other reasons that husbands might not allow their wives to attend late night meetings—such as the judgement it can bring to the family (as a result of the aforementioned stigma attached to female political aspirants and candidates) as well fear for their wives' safety (the Niger Delta has a number of security threats, including kidnapping and sexual violence against women,³⁶ which discourages many from travelling at night).

Husbands and other family members play a crucial role in whether or not a woman will decide to aspire and seek elected political office. Our research in all three states indicated that women with support from family tend to be more active in politics. One female participant even noted that losing is not as painful as when a husband and other family members intensely oppose a woman who has interest in vying for an elected position.

Electoral violence

Many women are fearful of participating in elections due to the high levels of electoral violence which are known to occur, particularly in the Niger Delta. Male politicians are known to support armed groups to perpetuate violence for them during election periods, and candidates themselves are also often targets in these attacks. Participants noted that female politicians and candidates are not as close to groups that are able to perpetrate violence as compared to male politicians. This puts women at a

* Interview with political office holder in Bayelsa State.

disadvantage to men when running for election, as violence and intimidation around election day are well known to heavily influence the final outcome.

Lack of financial support

Running for political office in Nigeria is a costly process. Money is needed, first, to get on the candidate list for an election—this includes party nomination fees, as well as payments to political figures, in order to be accepted onto the list. After the completion of this process, money is then needed for campaign materials and other campaigning activities.

The factor of money to compete in an election affects both men and women. However, it tends to affect women more as, on average, women do not have the same access to finances as men do. This was highlighted by one participant from Bayelsa:

“ *A man can stand up today and say [he wants] to contest for the position of the chairmanship...if he has the money, he will be able to do it. But a woman doesn't have the resources to go and influence the people that will go for the nomination form and her members that will go and vote for her as a nominee.** ”

Most women depend on their families and partners for financial support in an election. However, this can be problematic if family members do not support a woman's decision to run for office. Participants in all three states also highlighted that men are also more likely than women to receive sponsorship for an election, as many sponsors are reluctant to sponsor women, whom they consider as less marketable compared to men. This was mentioned by one participant, who noted that 'women candidates seem to be of less political value'; therefore, potential sponsors see a higher risk in supporting them.



Attendees at a Town Hall meeting at Obio/Akpor Local Government Area

While the cost of running in an election remains an issue for women, the waiving of fees for party nomination forms, which has been implemented by a number of political parties, provides a key opportunity to inspire more women to participate in politics. In the 2019 elections, the APC halved the cost of nomination for women. The PDP allowed women to apply for nomination for free—however, they also knew it was unlikely for any woman to win.

Late night party meetings

As mentioned earlier, in the run up to an election, candidates are required to attend political party meetings that are held late at night. Most women's ability to attend these meetings is restricted by their prior domestic responsibilities for the family and

* KII with female activist in Bayelsa State.

the household. Women in Nigeria are traditionally expected to take on this role, while the men go out to work. This leads to the widespread exclusion of women from key discussions and decision-making processes related to the elections that take place within the political parties they are running for. Subsequently, this limits their visibility during the campaigning period, as well as the number of opportunities for their voices as candidates to be heard, in comparison to men, in the run up to an election. Again, as already highlighted, many women in the Niger Delta also avoid going out at night out of fear for their own safety, and those who are seen out at this time are accused of promiscuity. Consequently, women who do attend these meetings face judgement and criticism, not only from fellow politicians, but also from the electorate, both male and female, making it extremely difficult for women to gain support in their campaigns.

Sexual harassment and judgement

Female aspirants and candidates often face sexual harassment when contesting elections. It is common for male politicians and other influential individuals to request sexual favours in return for the opportunity to appear on the candidate list for a given party. Women who refuse to comply with these requests may not end up with their names on the list, while those who end up contesting are judged regardless of their actions based on the assumptions associated with this process. This then creates fear among women to attend political meetings that are held at odd times for fear of being sexually abused, and makes parents reluctant to support their unmarried children in their candidacy. Young women also fear this themselves and become easily discouraged from running in an election. Participants noted that, while this is an issue for all female candidates, it is the young and unmarried who are most vulnerable, whereas their older women are more resilient to this type of behaviour.

5.2.1.3 Support from senior figures

Participants suggested that a key factor influencing women's participation as aspirants and candidates in elections in the Niger Delta is the extent to which women's participation in politics is promoted by senior figures—at the state or national level. For example, during the 2015 general elections, a female aspirant in Rivers State said the following under the leadership of Goodluck Jonathan:

“ *Women were beginning to take interest in participating in politics and governance because of the promissory notes that were attached to it. The former president's wife had made certain promises to give benefits to women who got involved in politics. This informed many of the women's desires [to participate] in politics.** ”

In 2019, in Akwa Ibom State, a similar situation was elucidated by a female politician:

“ *Governor Udom Emmanuel and his wife are trying their best to ensure that women are truly involved politically, and our women are trying their best to get involved. [...] During elections, forms are given to the women for free. They are helping the women to do free campaigns. [...] [During my campaign] the wife of the governor helped us to talk to the women, [to say] that the women should support their fellow women. So, they got into one or two positions in the state and in the local government.*** ”

* KII with female aspirant in Rivers State.

** KII with female politician in Akwa Ibom State.

Additionally, in Rivers State, participants highlighted that support from the current governor and other political figures in the state is increasing awareness about the level of women's political participation.*

Based on this, it can be inferred that increasing promotion of more female representation in politics by senior male and female figures at both the state and national level is likely to continue to influence more women and girls to aspire into political careers in the future.

5.2.2 Getting into power: women in elected positions

5.2.2.1 Female representation in 2019

The number of women in elected political positions is low in all three states. Table seven shows the number of men and women who were elected in the three states during the various elections which were held during the 2019 election period.

Table seven: Candidates and elected candidates in the 2019 elections in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Rivers states

			Akwa Ibom	Bayelsa	Rivers	Total
Governorship (Governor and Deputy Governor)	Candidates	F	19 (21%)	-	26 (21%)	45 (21%)
		M	71 (79%)	-	96 (79%)	167 (79%)
	Elected	F	0 (0%)	-	1 (50%)	1 (25%)
		M	2 (100%)	-	1 (50%)	3 (75%)
State House of Assembly	Candidates	F	64 (19%)	42 (12%)	94 (17%)	200 (16%)
		M	267 (81%)	315 (88%)	464 (83%)	1046 (84%)
	Elected	F	2 (8%)	2 (9%)	1 (3%)	5 (6%)
		M	22 (92%)	20 (91%)	31 (97%)	73 (94%)
Senatorial	Candidates	F	7 (21%)	4 (9%)	13 (22%)	24 (18%)
		M	27 (79%)	40 (91%)	46 (78%)	113 (82%)
	Elected	F	1 (33%)	0 (0%)	1 (33%)	2 (22%)
		M	2 (67%)	3 (100%)	2 (67%)	7 (78%)
House of Representatives	Candidates	F	19 (20%)	8 (10%)	27 (17%)	54 (16%)
		M	76 (80%)	76 (90%)	129 (83%)	281 (84%)
	Elected	F	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
		M	10 (100%)	5 (100%)	8 (100%)	23 (100%)
Total	Candidates	F	109 (20%)	54 (11%)	160 (18%)	323 (17%)
		M	441 (80%)	431 (89%)	735 (82%)	1607 (83%)
	Elected	F	3 (8%)	2 (7%)	3 (7%)	8 (7%)
		M	36 (92%)	28 (93%)	42 (93%)	106 (93%)

* FGD with men and women in Rivers State.

In total, 7% of all male candidates who contested these elections were elected, compared to only 2% of all female candidates.

Across all three states, after the 2019 elections, women constitute 7% of all elected political positions, as compared to 93% of men.

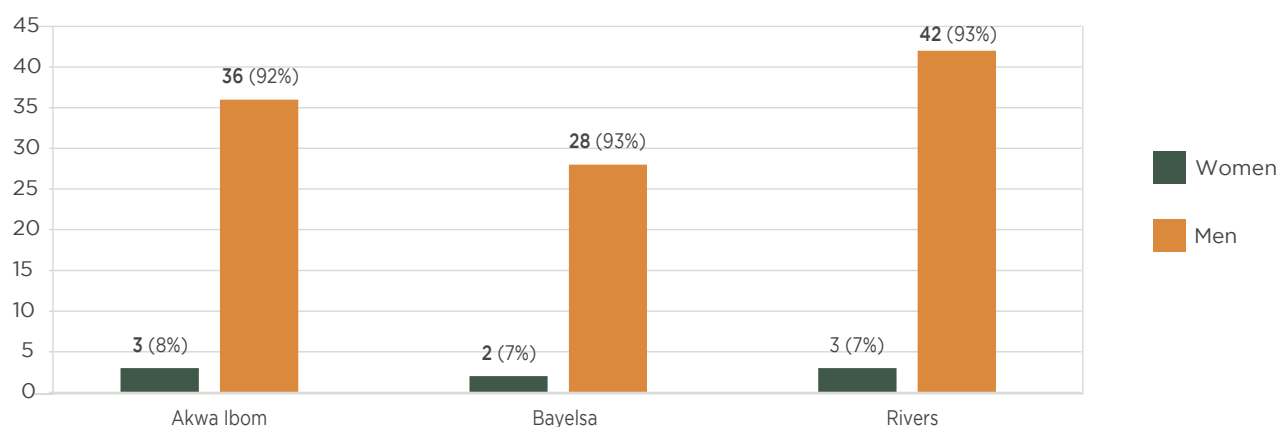
At the national level, no woman was elected into the House of Representatives, while one woman each was elected into the Senate in Akwa Ibom and Rivers, making it the first time a woman in Rivers State has ever been elected into the Senate. No woman from Bayelsa was elected into the Senate.

At the state level, no woman was elected into the position of governor; although, in Rivers State, a woman, Ipalibo Banigo, was re-elected as deputy governor after becoming the first woman to hold that position in the state after the 2015 elections. Despite this laudable achievement, some female participants in this research felt there are limited opportunities for orchestrating change in the interest of women in the office of deputy governor. According to one participant, ‘the deputy governor of Rivers State has no power’,* while another referred to the position as ‘what they call the ‘spare tyre’**. **

With only one woman elected and the highest number of available seats out of the three states, Rivers has the lowest proportion of women in the State House of Assembly across all three states (see Figure five). Participants in Bayelsa also observed that the number of women elected into the Bayelsa State House of Assembly in 2019 was half of that in 2015 (two women were elected in 2019, in contrast to four in 2015).

Overall, the representation of women in political positions is similar in all three states, but (marginally) highest in Akwa Ibom. Figure four illustrates the total number of women and men elected in each state in 2019.

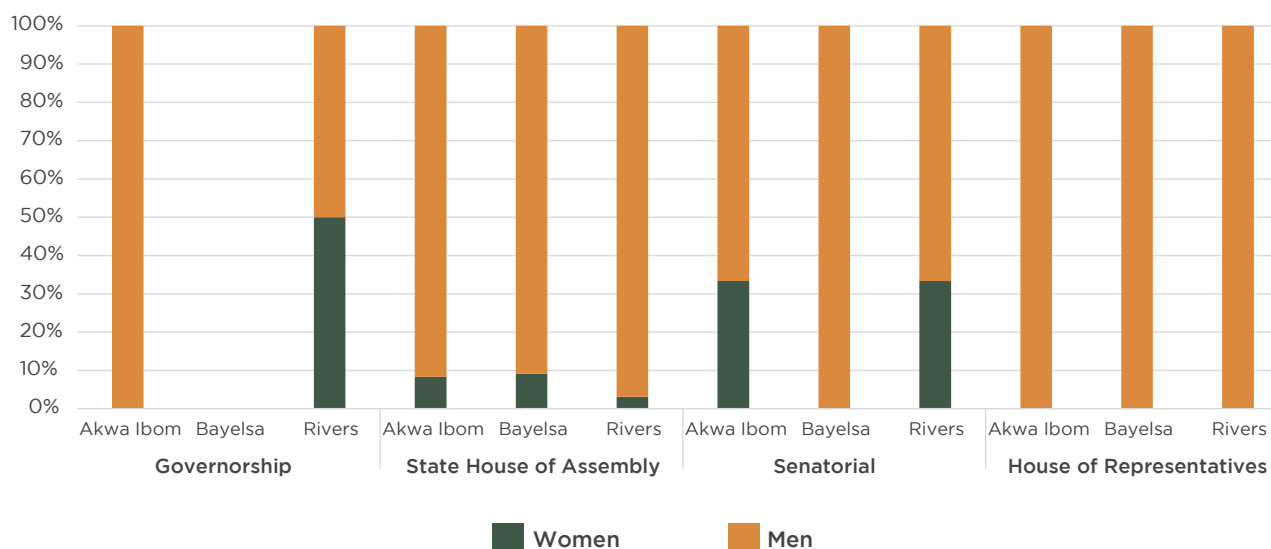
Figure four: Number and percentage of women and men elected in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Rivers states in the 2019 Governorship, State House of Assembly, Senatorial, and House of Representatives elections (excluding off-cycle Governorship elections in Bayelsa)



* FGD with community youth in Rivers State.

** FGD with men and women in Rivers State.

Figure five: Proportion of women and men elected in 2019, by state and election



While we were not able to obtain statistics from the 2015 elections, participants in the research said that the number of women elected in Rivers State in 2019 was less than it was in 2015, when two women in the state were elected into the House of Representatives and one woman into the State House of Assembly. The situation in Bayelsa State was the same, as half the number of women were elected in 2019 as compared to 2015 (two women in 2019, in contrast to four in 2015). Although we were unable to obtain statistics at the local government level, participants noted women are leading in some areas—for example, in Omuanwa LGA, which has been headed by women since 2015.

5.2.2.2 Godfathers

Godfatherism is an important factor in determining success in an election for men and women. Both male and female candidates are sometimes supported by powerful men called ‘Godfathers’. These individuals use their political influence to help candidates win an election. In most cases, candidates pay money to Godfathers for their support. Participants noted that women who have support from Godfathers during elections are often successful. In our research, it was highlighted that some female candidates in the 2019 elections achieved their success with the support of powerful male figures (although all women who participated in the research said they did not have help from Godfathers).

Despite the success associated with having a Godfather, female participants indicated that such a relationship tends to create, rather than solve, problems. This is because, as noted by the participants, Godfathers have been known to exert unnecessary amounts of control over their candidates. Furthermore, Godfathers continue to impose their influence upon women once they have made it into their elected position. This predicament was aptly described by a female politician in Rivers State:

“

*One of the reasons Nigerian politics is the way it is— [in terms of] lack of democracy—is because of the issue of Godfatherism. [...] It becomes difficult when you start attaching yourself to one particular person or group—this creates room for suspicion, distrust and even limitations in your success in politics. [...] If I was attached to a group or person that opposed (politician’s name withheld), I would not have been able to learn that much from her—she would have been suspicious of me. This is what Godfatherism has done to politics in different parties, the state and the nation. It is totally unnecessary; it creates bottlenecks and prevents accountability. One should be free to access anyone at every point. I do not believe in Godfatherism. As a woman, it is even more risky to have a Godfather because people just assume that you are having sexual relations with such people.**

”

Consequently, female participants were in agreement that women are better off without seeking help from a Godfather. They also stressed that women, especially those who are unmarried, are safer without Godfathers. Despite these issues, some participants noted that male candidates are more likely to have Godfathers compared to female candidates.

Case study

Patience Ikiromao-Owiye, is a native of Tombia, in Degema LGA, which is located in the Kalabari area. Patience was Supervisory Councillor until 2018. At present, she is Community Youth Leader (Secretary) and mobiliser in the PDP. Despite the advantage of financial backing and support that her male rivals received from sponsors, Patience won the position of Youth Secretary in the community by a huge margin. Her

success was achieved without support from sponsors or a Godfather. Her victory owes much to a combination of factors, including determination and boldness in the face of opposition from men, some of whom outrightly discouraged and advised her to step down for a male contestant. Her achievement demonstrates that women do not need to rely on a Godfather to win elections.

5.2.3 Working with those in power: women in appointed positions

In addition to elected positions, we wanted to examine the kinds of positions women are appointed into at the state level. Appointed positions—those that are not elected—include special advisor, senior special advisor, personal assistant, commissioner, deputy chairperson, and woman leader (the latter being a position which is selected from within political parties). We found the number of women in appointed positions is low in each of the three states, as male party leaders tend to allocate these positions to fellow male politicians. This is demotivating for women aspiring to political careers, and contributes to an absence of female voices in leadership positions. It also further limits women’s opportunities to participate in politics more broadly, as women highlighted that receiving political appointments provides the advantage of developing necessary networks and knowledge which can enable them to eventually run for elected positions.

* KII with female politician in Rivers State.

5.2.3.1 The woman leader

One position which is always reserved for women within political parties is that of the woman leader. This position is designed to engage with women at the local level and provide opportunities to address women's needs in party decision-making. According to a male politician in River State, *"if there is anything the women are doing at the ward level, [the woman leader] will be responsible for it"*.^{*} However, both female voters and candidates who participated in the research said they do not have sufficient confidence in occupants of this role to work in the interests of women, and strongly criticised it for failing to achieve its objective. Instead, participants noted, the position is used for the purpose of winning support from the female electorate for a certain political party or candidate during an election. This is primarily done to serve the interests of male candidates.

To achieve this objective, the woman leader visits communities in the pre-election period and goes door-to-door mobilising women for campaign rallies, encouraging women to join their campaign. Participants highlighted that woman leaders in the 2019 elections did not fulfil any other purpose except this one, failing to listen to the needs of women in communities in order to relay back to party leaders for discussion during party meetings. Furthermore, there was some confusion about the expected responsibilities of the woman leader, as described by one participant:

" It depends on how the particular individual sees her office. If you see the office as something that you will just show up when there is a ward meeting...that is the way the office will be run. But if you read the constitution—a lot of them, after being elected as woman leader, don't even ask for the constitution to know what their responsibilities are—so they reduce the office to ceremonial mobilising. That is not the only role. They should be conversant with what the constitution says. A lot of them don't know."^{**}

As a result, participants felt that there is a lack of opportunity in this role to contribute meaningfully to decisions which address the interests of women.



The research is presented at the More Women in Governance Research Validation Workshop in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, July 2019

^{*} KII with male politician in Rivers State.

^{**} KII with male politician in Rivers State.

5.2.3.2 Opportunities in political appointments

Women who have careers in politics said they see more opportunities for themselves in appointed, rather than elected, positions. This is because they consider the chance of getting elected as a woman in Nigeria is extremely slim. Female participants said that job security is important to them—so, for women who are already in government, it is safer for them to stick with their current jobs in appointed positions than risk losing their job by quitting in order to contest an elected position which they know they will most likely not win.

To be appointed a position, however, is predicated on the disposition of the state's governor. In Rivers State, for instance, during the last local government elections, the PDP under instruction from Governor Wike assigned the office of deputy chairperson across all 23 LGAs in the state to women. In LGAs with up to ten or eleven Wards, the PDP was further instructed to ensure at least six seats were made available for women to run as councillors. Some of these female deputy chairpersons, who took on the role after 12 former chairpersons were suspended by the governor for refusing to attend state functions,* have been lauded for their good performance.

Participants in Rivers State also highlighted that efforts have been made by the office of the governor and political parties within the state in order to increase the visibility of women in political positions. One female participant noted there are gender-friendly politics within the state: *“We are making headway; we have 23 women deputy chairpersons—it has never been like this. Even in the cabinet, until last week, there was a 30/70 ratio of women and men”*.** In addition, both male and female politicians participating in the research stated that the number of women in appointed positions in Rivers State is increasing.

While this does indicate progress towards closing the existing gender gap and should be encouraged, some female participants recognised that there is an inherent risk, as with all appointed positions (including men), in hiring the wrong people for the job. As one participant noted, *“the governor of Rivers State handpicked those 23 local government vice chairwomen. If it were the normal way of screening—even if they are qualified—no one would have allowed them”*.*** Nonetheless, these appointments could have a wider positive impact on female political representation in Rivers State in the long term, as many of these female deputy chairpersons will likely go on to seek higher political offices in the future, such as chairperson or members of the State House of Assembly. Moreover, the increase in potential female political role models is likely to have a knock-on effect of encouraging more women and girls at the local level to aspire to careers in politics as time goes on.

5.2.4 Political careers: the roles and actions of women in existing elected or non-elected positions

Once women are either elected or appointed into political positions, we wanted to find out what roles they are typically placed in, and to understand the extent to which these positions are used to influence women's engagement in politics. Our findings highlighted that women mostly play peripheral roles in politics and are not in the mainstream of party decision-making (for example, they are not usually on the committee). Male and female politicians expressed a strong view that women need to be more involved in leadership and decision-making processes within political parties. This finding is also reflected in the fact that many female participants said there are a lack of female politicians whom they feel inspired by.

* Punch Nigeria. (2019). 'Wike suspends 12 local government chairmen in Rivers'. [Online] Available at: <https://punchng.com/wike-suspends-12-local-government-chairmen-in-rivers/>

** KII with female politician in Rivers State.

*** FGD with men and women in Rivers State.

5.2.4.1 Strategic use of female politicians

As mentioned before, one of the only roles designated specifically for women within a political party is the role of woman leader. The woman leader, both in the community and in political parties, is intended to represent the interests of women. She is supposed to meet with women on a regular basis, listen to their views, and document their challenges. The woman leader also invites women to town hall meetings, where she sells the party and tries to win their support in an upcoming election.

However, female participants repeatedly noted seeing this role as a means through which politicians can strategically mobilise female voters—rather than using it constructively to represent the female public and their needs in party decision-making. As campaigners, male politicians and candidates depend substantially on women for mobilising women, especially in the countryside. According to participants, male politicians rely on the woman leader in their party to do this, increasing the number of women in attendance of political rallies and participating in campaign activities. Other positions occupied by women, as highlighted by participants in Bayelsa State, include the welfare secretary and heads of committees at the state and national level. However, it was noted that these positions lack substantive opportunities to influence party decisions in favour of women on core issues of aspiration and candidacy.

5.2.4.2 Call for greater engagement between women in politics and in communities

Participants felt that many women in existing political positions fail to relate closely with women outside of strategic engagements. They stressed that a lot of female politicians do not respond to the particular needs of women, and the female public often have problems supporting the woman leaders due to a perception that their views are not being heard. Young women in particular said they feel disappointed that older women with experience in politics distance themselves after achieving victory in elections. One female participant narrated her experience of how a female politician, whom she followed closely and served throughout an election season of campaigns, gave the position of personal assistant to her daughter after being successful at the polls. The participant noted that, not only did the politician lose trust and loyalty, she lost an opportunity to mentor young women with an interest in politics.

This notion that female politicians tend to distance themselves after elections was reflected by a number of participants who said that many women who have succeeded into political office generally concentrate on following men in order to further their political careers. To some extent, this is probably necessary at present for women to achieve success and longevity in their political careers, and the same criticisms can be made of male politicians—perhaps more so. Nonetheless, participants highlighted that this has led to a lack of faith among women in female politicians, and suggests why many women are unsupportive of female politicians and candidates. This was highlighted by a female politician in Akwa Ibom State:

“ Once you are in a political position, women will support you, if you are good to them. The grassroots women in my local government are supportive of me. Also, the female stakeholders in my local government were supportive of me to be in this position. When you are in office, be nice to the women—if you are not nice to those women, you are done. ”*

* KII with female politician in Akwa Ibom State.

The overarching feeling among participants was that greater solidarity and engagement between women in political positions and their constituents is critical to improving women’s overall engagement in politics. Female participants expressed a strong desire for women in politics to provide mentorship to women and girls in communities. This was expressed by one participant in the following:

“ *[There should be] a proper talk, or seminar, or counselling of these women, and young women at an attainable age, on politics, and they should rid the idea that these women have concerning fear of achievement.** ”

It was suggested that such mentorship would be of tremendous value, would inspire women to participate in politics, and could significantly increase the number of women interested in aspiring to political careers in the Niger Delta. Participants further suggested that, in addition to receiving this service from women in current elected and appointed positions, they would also benefit from mentorship from women who have previous experience in politics, women who occupy important positions as top civil servants and professionals, gender activists, and NGOs—as these actors can use their roles to increase awareness and education of young women in an attempt to close the existing gender gap in politics.



Participants enjoying mentorship sessions from women in politics, gender activism, NGO’s, and the civil service.

* FGD with university students in Bayelsa State.

6. Conclusion

Interest in the Niger Delta's oil wealth makes the region's political dynamics unique in Nigeria. Elections in the Niger Delta often experience high levels of violence and interference related to the intense competition to control the region's resource-rich states and the heavily patronage-based political system which has emerged as part of this. As at the national level, the political system in the Niger Delta is dominated by men. There are very few women in leadership positions, and the current situation deters most women and young women from aspiring to them in the future.

This research sought to unravel the status and trend of women's political participation in the Niger Delta—as citizens, as candidates, and as political office holders. Essentially, our findings repeatedly return to the underlying issue of social norms: women are expected to fulfil different roles to men in society, which inhibits their potential to participate in all aspects of politics. As citizens, there is an expectation that men should be responsible for engaging in debate on political issues and with political representatives to address community needs. This reinforces the issue of women being excluded from these types of discussions and, as a result, having limited knowledge about the political system. This situation is then capitalised on by male-dominated political parties, which use bribery to gain support from the female electorate for male politicians in the run up to an election. Consequently, many women choose not to register or vote in elections because they lack faith in politicians and the political system in general.

The same argument can be used to explain women's limited participation in formal politics. Participants identified a number of interrelated barriers to women's participation as aspirants and candidates in elections, all of which stem from an overarching view of women's role in society, which is that women are responsible for domestic duties, while men are expected to go out to work and take on leadership positions, bringing home money for the family. These barriers include lack of financial support, lack of family support, late night political party meetings, sexual harassment, and electoral violence. In addition, there is a negative perception of women who contest elections, as well as a lack of knowledge among women about the political process (due, in part, to their inherent exclusion from such processes in the first place). It is therefore unsurprising that there is a broad lack of interest among women in the Niger Delta to aspire to political careers.

This negative view of women who participate in politics is also associated with a feeling of disappointment in current female politicians, whom women do not feel provide adequate attention to their local level needs. This may partly explain why many women are so unpopular in elections in terms of winning votes—in 2019, only 7% of women were elected across the three states. While there are more women in appointed positions, representation is still low, as male party leaders tend to recruit fellow men into these positions. Furthermore, where women are appointed, it is often into positions with limited ability to bring about significant change, or they are used deliberately to support the interests of male politicians. The situation remains the same for women in elected positions, as they are not elected into major decision-making roles. This underrepresentation prevents women’s views from getting heard in political parties and, therefore, from getting sufficiently addressed in party decision-making.

The situation is not all bad, however, as there are some examples where women’s political participation in the Niger Delta appears to be improving. For the first time, in 2015, a woman was elected into the position of deputy governor in Rivers State, and was re-elected in 2019. In addition, women have also received some noteworthy political appointments. This coincides with the fact that women in all three states acknowledged an increased awareness among women in terms of voter education and the need for greater female representation in politics, as well as an increasing number of women showing interest in contesting elections.


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“Women are being used because they do not know the rights and power that they have. They need to understand the strength they have...[if] a woman wants to contest an election.”

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