



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.



Listen to Women:

Identifying Barriers to and Opportunities for Women's Participation and Leadership in Nigeria



WOMEN FOR WOMEN
INTERNATIONAL

Introduction

Around the world, women are underrepresented in decision-making across the public sphere including in civic engagement,¹ political participation² and leadership,³ economic and labor participation,⁴ and peace processes.⁵ This underrepresentation is often a result of formal and informal barriers that women face when seeking to participate across the spectrum of private to public decision-making spaces. These barriers exist despite women's fundamental rights to equal participation and engagement in public life and in the decision-making processes that impact their lives.^{6,7,8,9}

Women in conflict-affected communities and contexts face unique and interconnected barriers to their participation and leadership, and their underrepresentation in public life and in decision-making can have detrimental ripple effects within their communities. This is because, in addition to being key for upholding women's fundamental rights, ensuring that women have equal ability and access to participate in society is also critical for upholding broader human rights and democratic values, advancing sustainable development, and achieving peace and security.^{10,11}

This report explores barriers to women's participation and leadership in the Nigeria context and suggests opportunities and policy recommendations for achieving full, equal, and meaningful participation based on evidence and insight from desk research, surveys, focus group discussions (FGDs), and interviews with women and women's rights organizations (WROs) in Nigeria – with a particular focus on Plateau State.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

The challenge

Women's participation in public life is a key criterion for measuring equality in society, both because it is a fundamental human right and because it is considered an important pathway to achieving sustainable development, stability, and peace. This importance is heightened in contexts affected by conflicts or instability within governance and politics.

Women face far-reaching detrimental consequences when they are unable to participate in the institutions and processes that make decisions that affect them. In this report, we explored the concept of 'participation' and 'decision-making' across multiple dimensions. This is because Women for Women International (WfWI) and Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre's (WARDC) experience and evidence from programming suggests that efforts to achieve representation and participation of women at the highest level of politics and decision-making are strengthened through holistic approaches that also address participation and decision-making at the individual, family, and community level.

We also link participation to decision-making as the foundation for understanding whether women's participation is meaningful and whether they are able to leverage their participation for outcomes that improve their lives. For example, at the political level, the threshold for full, equal, and meaningful participation in peace and political processes is stipulated as "direct, substantive, and formal inclusion" so that women "can influence the outcomes of negotiations and other processes, as well as their implementation".¹² These criteria for participation assert that consultation, engagement or involvement without any actual influence or without the conditions for influence is not meaningful participation. This is true elsewhere in women's lives, where efforts to uphold women's rights to participation should be holistic and include an assessment of barriers and enablers to women's rights and agency to ensure that women's participation is linked to their influence over decisions and processes.

Despite developments in this field and in global advocacy for women's rights to participate, the reality to which these rights are upheld realized still require in-depth study and analysis, particularly concerning context-specific and evolving challenges and opportunities they face in participating in decision-making across the spectrum of private to public spaces.

The status of women's participation in Nigeria is the result of a complex interplay of factors, including cultural factors reflecting women's self-awareness, self-confidence, and the norms of the communities they live in – particularly those norms that reinforce men in positions of authority and power for decision-making at the household, community, and national levels.¹³

In addition to cultural factors, women may face additional interconnected forms of marginalization such as poverty, exposure to conflict and violence, and lack of access to education which can lead to their underrepresentation in the formal and informal, private, and public decision-making processes that affect their own lives. Therefore, it is particularly important to consider the interplay of factors affecting women's participation, as well as the diversity of women, when designing efforts to enable women's participation that is broad and inclusive of women facing intersecting vulnerabilities and barriers to their realization of rights and participation in public life.

This report elevates those diverse experiences and perspectives to ensure that the voices of women in Nigeria are heard and that their priorities are the foundation of strategies developed to address the gaps in women's full, equal, and meaningful participation.

Methodology

The realities of women in all their diversity are unlikely to be represented in official national and global level data, particularly as existing data collection efforts struggle to capture accurate or sufficiently aggregable data. This is especially a problem in situations of conflict, displacement, and poor governance which increases the risk that women living in such contexts will continue to be underserved, their needs under-resourced, and their rights unprotected. To ensure that the most marginalized women are not being intentionally or unintentionally left behind in the implementation of global and national development, peacebuilding, and humanitarian agendas, we must meet women where they are and apply a gender lens to research and data collection that aims to center their experiences and voices.

The research presented and analyzed in this report is based on the following quantitative and qualitative data which includes direct surveys, discussions, and interviews with a range of women in Nigeria:

- Desk research on women's participation in the Nigerian context;
- Surveys and focus group discussions with women in Nigeria on their own attitudes, experiences, and recommendations around women's participation;
- Interviews with women's rights and human rights organizations in Nigeria on their experiences, efforts, analysis, and recommendations around women's participation.

The survey targeted 249 women across a range of ages, religious backgrounds, and ethnicities across Plateau State, Nigeria.

The key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted in six communities across Pankshin, Riyom, and Jos-East Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Plateau State in Nigeria. The exact study locations and communities by LGAs include:

- Jos-East LGA: Angware and Shere communities
- Riyom LGA: Riyom and Bachi communities
- Pankshin LGA: Pankshin and Bwarak communities

The key stakeholders (respondents) for the study include women, women's rights organizations (WROs), and women who received rights-based and leadership training through Women for Women International's Change Agent program.¹⁴

A validation workshop was held with data collectors and study participants following the analysis of the survey, FGDs, and interviews to affirm the key findings and recommendations which are reflected in this report.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International. Zumunchi VSLA group during their monthly meeting in Jos.

Who Did We Ask? – 249 women surveyed

Age

18-30
26%

46-60
25%

31-45
48%

61+
1%

Religion



CHRISTIAN
81% | 202
women



MUSLIM
19% | 47
women

Disability



YES
5.6%



NO
94.4%

Occupation

Occupation	Percentage	Number
Banking	<1%	1 woman
Business	20%	49 women
Civil servant	13%	32 women
Farmer	37%	91 women
Food vendor	1%	3 women
Health worker	<1%	1 woman
Librarian	<1%	1 woman
Public servant	<1%	1 woman
Student	2%	4 women
Tailoring	2%	4 women
Teacher	6%	15 women
Trader	9%	22 women

Education Level



NO FORMAL EDUCATION
14%



PRIMARY/SECONDARY
58%



HIGHER EDUCATION DEGREE
28%

Marital Status



SINGLE
11%



WIDOW
12%



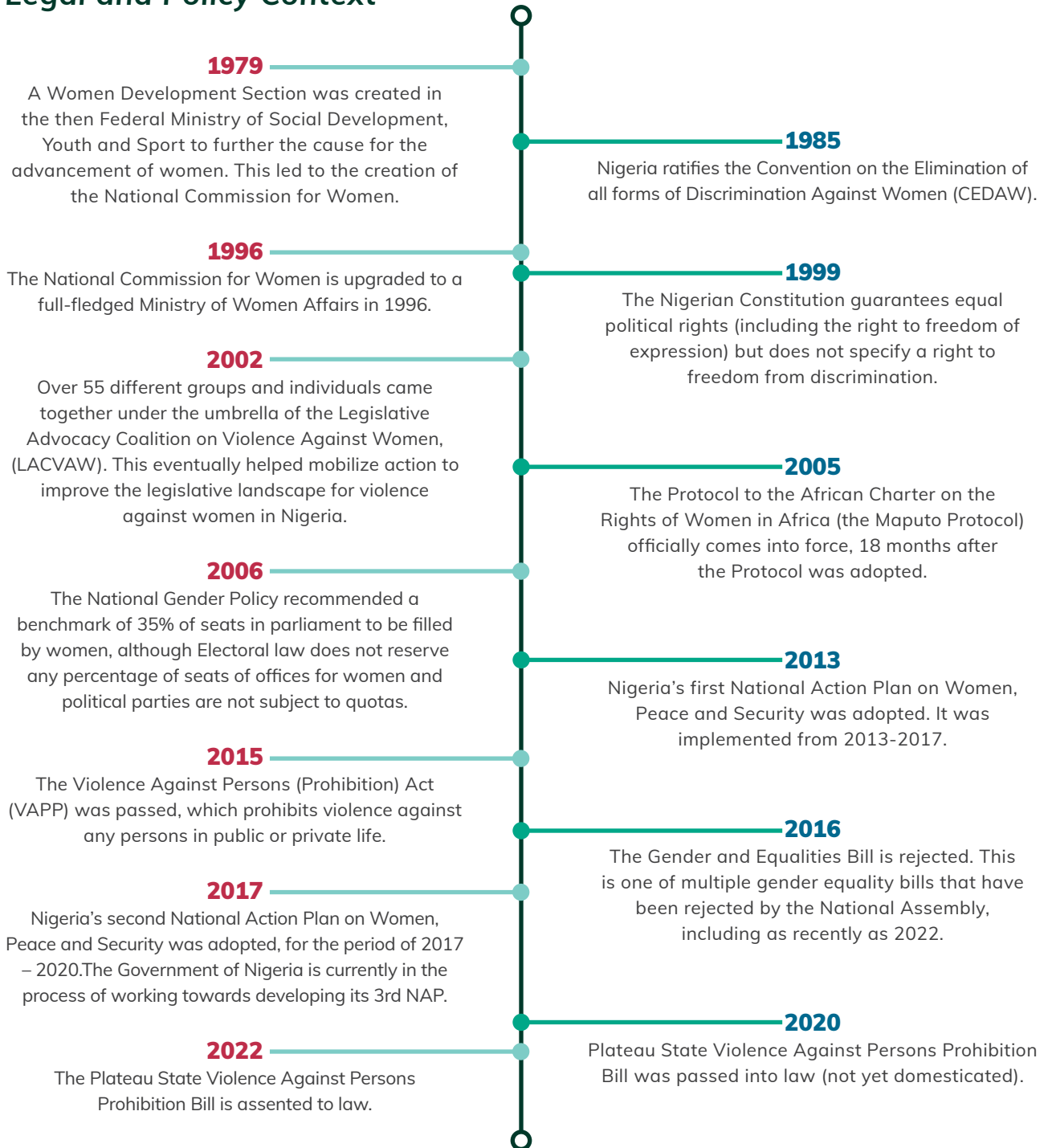
MARRIED
77%



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

Context

Legal and Policy Context



Overall, there have been challenges in reaching sufficient consensus for the Nigerian Government to implement laws and policies to improve gender equality - both in relation to women's participation, voice, and leadership and more broadly - despite formal support for it. The country is also a signatory to international agreements, for example through its 1985 ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and endorsement of the 2005 Maputo Protocol. However, legislators in the National Assembly have resisted gender equality initiatives, including multiple readings of the 2016 Gender and Equalities Bill, with 92.7% of male senators reporting that the word equality "makes them feel uncomfortable".¹⁵

In addition, the federalized nature of Nigeria's legal and policy system means that domestication at the national level does not mean automatic domestication at the state level.¹⁶ This has meant that national commitments relating to gender equality - including those on Women, Peace, and Security specifically - have not always translated into practice across Nigeria's varied political landscape.

For example, while the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) - prohibiting violence against any persons in public or private life - was passed in 2015, violence against women remains pervasive across Nigeria.¹⁷ The VAPP legislation includes provisions for and protections against physical offenses including those that disproportionately affect women such as "...female genital mutilation; forceful ejection from home; forced financial dependence or economic abuse; forced isolation; emotional, verbal and psychological abuse; harmful widowhood practices; and spousal battery, among others."¹⁸ After passing the VAPP at the national level, the government has now expanded the legislative scope and language into state law. 31 out of Nigeria's 36 states have adopted the VAPP legislation to make it binding law within those states.¹⁹ However, this sporadic and incomplete countrywide adoption illustrates the challenges in implementing any comprehensive legal framework within Nigeria that upholds and protects women's rights, including her right to participate in a range of decision-making processes and spaces. The gaps in protection within the legal and policy context may create space for sociocultural norms, behaviors, attitudes, and traditions to supersede legal permissibility.

Women's advocacy groups are pushing for more government action to expand the reach and enforcement of such legislation. Before the VAPP Act was enacted in 2015, there was no existing legislation on violence against women at the national level. Whilst a few states had passed legislation on domestic violence, harmful practices, and gender-based violence (GBV), much existing legislation was outdated and not adequately enforced. The VAPP is a product of 13 years of legislative advocacy by more than 50 different groups under the Legislative Advocacy Coalition on Violence Against Women including WROs, women advocates and government officials. This is an important signal of how grassroots women advocates have successfully pushed for legislative change in Nigeria, and an example of the critical impact that women's participation and leadership can have.²⁰

At the state level in Plateau, the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Bill was passed into legislative status in 2020 and then into executive law status in 2022.²¹ This recent development signals a willingness at the state level for local government to work with grassroots women's rights organizations toward building a more enabling environment for women's political participation. Grassroots advocates focus on expanding the implementation and enforcement of the VAPP Act as a tool for reducing VAW, which is often cited as a barrier for women's inclusion in politics.²²



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

As with the VAPP Act, national-level commitments relating to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda have also been adopted at the state level. Nigeria's first National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS was developed in 2013. It included specific gender markers such as increasing gender mainstreaming in peacebuilding and conflict management, with women's participation and representation as a main pillar. Nigeria's second NAP was effective from 2017-2020 and was updated from the first NAP to address specific dynamics that emerged after 2013, including violent extremism, worsening farmer-herder conflicts, and gaps in efforts to address violence against women. The consultative development of the second NAP led to State Action Plans that integrated national commitments into the federal system. Plateau State now has its own State Action Plan for WPS. Nigeria is unique in how it has localized its implementation of WPS with State and Local Action Plans with emphasis on sub-national plans.²³ Nigeria is currently in the process of working towards developing its third NAP.²⁴ In its reporting on successes of the WPS NAP, Nigeria has cited progress towards expanding women's participation and representation including through increased inclusion of women in councils of traditional rulers.²⁵

Political Context

Despite the legal and policy frameworks and processes that exist across Nigeria, and in Plateau State specifically, many women still find themselves excluded from a range of decision-making spaces, including the political arena.

There are no formal bans on women taking office and the Nigerian Constitution (1999), technically, guarantees equal political rights. Nigeria's National Gender Policy (2006) recommended a benchmark of 35% of seats in parliament to be filled by women. However, this recommended benchmark is still far from being realized in practice. In fact, the proportion of women holding seats in national parliament in Nigeria has gradually decreased since 2010, with women holding just 3.6% of seats in national parliament in 2022.²⁶

In Plateau State, the administrative structure consists of the state cabinet, the House of Assembly, and local government areas. Plateau State is divided into 17 Local Government Areas (LGAs) with different ethnic geographies.²⁷ Political moments such as election periods have led to heightened conflict and insecurity across Plateau State. The 2011 elections were the country's most violent. Jos was among several cities in Nigeria that experienced religion-based post-election violence, and more than 800 people were killed and 65,000 people were displaced.²⁸ As recently as February 2024, a senior Public Secretary of Pankshin LGA was killed.²⁹ This correlation between political moments and heightened tension is mirrored nationally. Between January 2022 and February 2023, there were 174 violent events reported which resulted in 280 fatalities. Whilst 20% of these were recorded in Lagos, violence was also reported in Plateau State.³⁰



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

Despite this heightened insecurity and conflict in the political landscape of Plateau, LGAs across the state have taken part in substantive action to build a more inclusive environment for women in politics. For example, Jos North, Mangu, Riyom and Wase LGA's have all developed local National Action Plans for WPS that aim to include women as participants in formal and informal peacebuilding processes.³¹ Plateau State also has a Peacebuilding Agency which is a governmental platform established in 2016 to respond to peace and security across the state.³² This institution has made commitments to gender mainstreaming and engaging with young people for long-term inclusive peace.

Social Context

Nigeria is made up of a diverse mix of over 380 different ethnic groups across its 36 states and Federal Capital Territory.³³ Plateau State is the 12th largest state in Nigeria, and in Plateau alone there are over forty ethno-linguistic groups many of whom share similar cultural traditions and who are predominantly farmers.³⁵

Across the diverse groups in Plateau State, social and cultural norms remain a common barrier to women's participation. These social norms are a collection of unwritten rules and beliefs that contribute to expectations about how women should behave in society. These include, for example, the expectation for women to be caregivers, housewives, mothers, restricted to the home, and absent from decision-making tables. There is also a social and cultural preference for male-children and an inheritance system that solely advantages male heirs.^{34,36}

These social norms are exacerbated by the formalized patriarchal system in Nigeria, creating a strong confluence of direct and indirect barriers to women's participation. For example, in some communities women require their husband's explicit permission to take part in political activity.³⁸ Additionally, 27% of women in Nigeria reported experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) in 2022 and the risk of backlash at home or other forms of gender-based violence for violating social norms often acts as an indirect barrier to women's participation.³⁷

Economic Context

Nigeria boasts the largest population in Africa - over 215 million people.³⁹ Although it also boasts the largest economy on the continent, many women in Nigeria face economic insecurity. Women are 25% less likely than men to participate in the labor force, and their wages tend to be 25% less than men's when they do.⁴⁰ By unpacking the barriers to women's economic inclusion and broader political participation in Nigeria, this research goes beyond national averages to capture the reality for women living in the most marginalized part of the country.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

Plateau State - also known as the 'Tin City' - was formerly a mining region in the early twentieth century under the colonial power of Britain.⁴¹ Whilst large-scale mining has now ceased, the long-term impact of such operations remains in the form of environmental degradation and economic insecurity. It is mainly women working in the informal economy that engage in unlicensed undocumented small-scale mining over long hours and with little income.⁴² Trees were also cut down across Plateau State to make space for the mining industry, negatively impacting farming productivity, reducing access to resources, and indirectly worsening existing local conflict dynamics.

Economic insecurity is also exacerbated by social norms, attitudes, and behaviors in Plateau State. In rural areas, women in Nigeria are less likely to be active in the labor market because of their gendered child-caring responsibilities. By age 20, 50% of women in rural areas in Nigeria are married, compared to just 4% of men. This means that these married women, who are often restricted to the home because of their domestic responsibilities, are more likely to be in lower-earning, informal market jobs rather than jobs in the formal economy that require a different level of education or experience.⁴³

Due to the gendered domestic roles that women play, many are excluded from the labor market. This exclusion is underpinned by social and cultural norms that burden women with domestic work which has exacerbated the economic gender gap in Nigeria, including in Plateau State. In Nigeria, 84.9% of women are engaged in 'vulnerable employment' and are employed in the informal economy with poorer working conditions and little social protection.⁴⁵ These workers are the least likely to have formal work arrangements, safety nets for economic shocks, or social protection which makes them much more susceptible to falling into poverty.⁴⁴

Conflict Landscape

In recent years, conflict has escalated and expanded in Plateau State - with tensions between farmer-herder groups becoming increasingly complex. Outbreaks of violent conflict mainly revolve around land disputes and farmer-herder dynamics that are further complicated by religious tension since farmers are traditionally Christian and herders are traditionally Muslim.⁴⁶ Farmer-herder conflicts often take place when one group attacks another and then the community or groups within the community retaliate to the attacks. These revolve around agricultural, static communities (farmers) and nomadic, cattle-herding groups (herders) who come into conflict over land access and ownership. The population in Plateau State continues to rise, adding increased pressure to the land used for farming and cattle grazing.⁴⁷

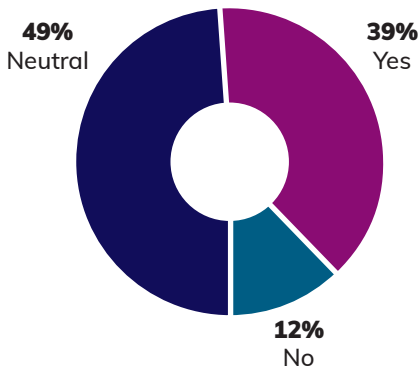


Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

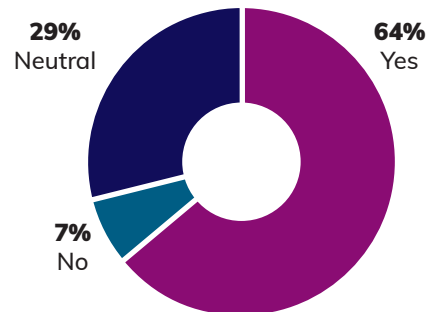
Findings

Desk research and the context in Nigeria suggest that women face interconnected, informal and formal barriers to their participation. Women surveyed across Plateau State also agree that there are barriers hindering their participation across the economic and political sphere.

ARE THERE ANY BARRIERS THAT HINDER WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES?



ARE THERE ANY BARRIERS THAT HINDER WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL PROCESSES?



More women felt that there were barriers hindering women's political participation (64%) versus economic participation (39%). Their broader survey responses and the supplementary FGD and interview inputs provide detail on what these barriers are and how they are experienced by women, as well as the civic spaces that women do engage with and opportunities to strengthen them.

Barriers

WHAT ARE SOME REASONS YOU DO NOT FEEL WELCOME TO PARTICIPATE IN COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES?

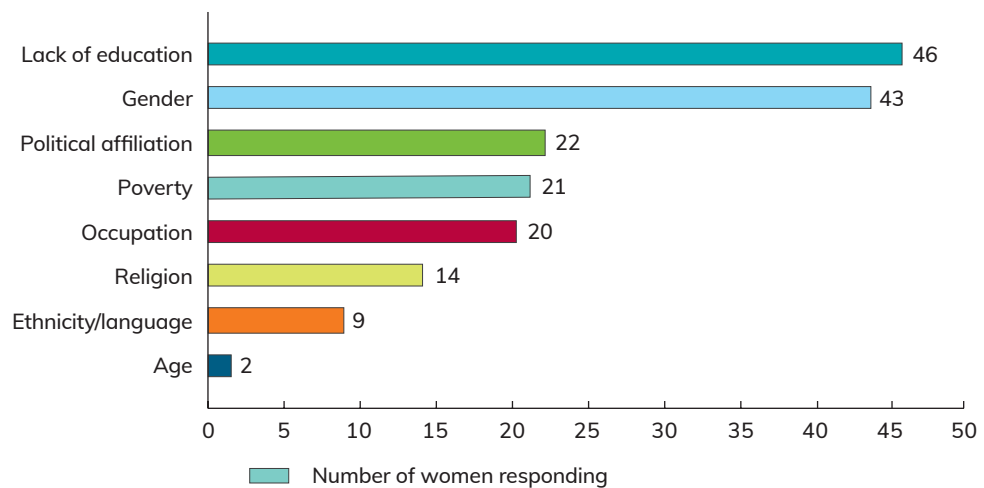


Figure 1: Women responding to the survey were asked to select from a list of eight reasons they do not feel welcome to participate in community activities. They were permitted to choose more than one option and also provide open ended responses.

When asked about the reasons that women do not feel welcome to participate in community activities, women surveyed responded that lack of education and gender were among the top two reasons. Political affiliation, poverty, and occupation were among the second tier of reasons that women did not feel welcome to participate.

Survey responses, FGDs, and interviews reinforce these reasons as interconnected barriers to their participation. These barriers include:

- Women’s personal awareness and confidence – including links to their lack of education;
- Community attitudes and norms including gender discrimination, stigma around participation, and gender-based violence (GBV);
- Economic vulnerability including poverty and the challenges facing women’s economic independence;
- Institutional constraints including lack of government support and laws that reduce women’s rights and status such as lack of land rights.

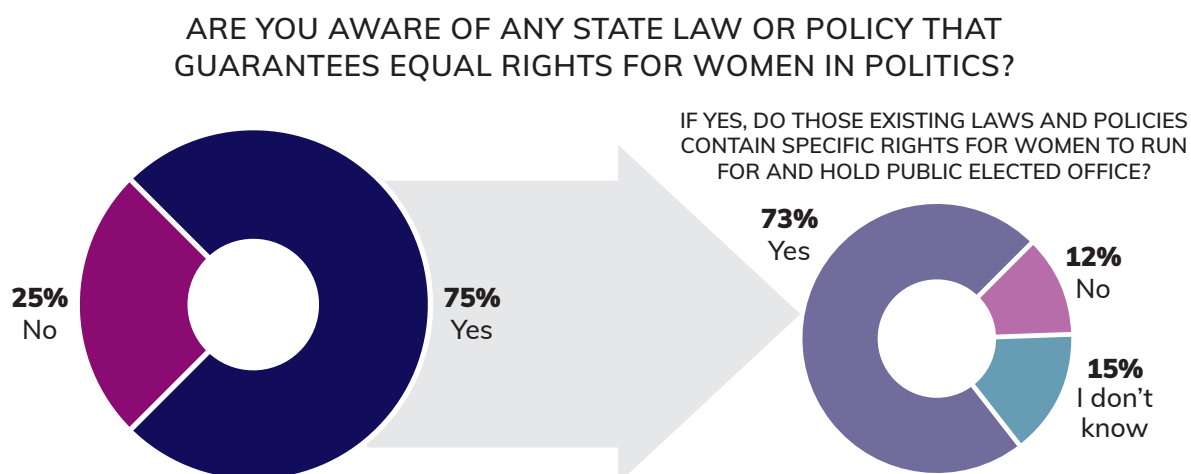
Personal Awareness and Confidence

Awareness of rights to participate

Women’s responses reflected a range of limited to broad awareness and knowledge around the protection of women’s right to participate within Nigeria. Some women, especially in rural areas, responded that they have little knowledge on the formal legislation that guarantees and protects their rights to participate.

However, all the women respondents recognized and were able to define the concepts of ‘freedom of speech’, ‘political participation’, and ‘decision-making power’. All the key informants and FGD participants from Angware, Shere, Riyom, Bachi and Pankshin clearly described ‘freedom of speech’ as a person’s right to “express one’s opinion and feelings publicly on any issue of interest or concern without fear of interference, molestation, harassment or punishment from the government, security agencies, the community or anyone”. Women recognized freedom of expression as a fundamental human right that allows everyone to hold, speak, write, and share ideas and opinions on any issue of public concern or private to an individual. However, a majority of the participants from Angware and Shere communities of Jos-East LGA of Plateau State were not aware that it is their right as enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution.

Women from Riyom, Bachi, Bwarak, Pankshin, Angware and Shere communities described ‘political participation’ as the right “to belong to any political party or political group of their choice without any fear of molestation” and “the act of being actively involved in politically related activities and electioneering processes either as a voter to elect leaders of your choice or as a contestant to be voted for as well as to attend political party rallies during elections.”



Of the 75% of women surveyed who were aware of state laws and policies that guarantee their political rights, 73% were also aware that these policies contain specific provisions to uphold women’s rights to run in elections and hold public office.

In FGDs and interviews, women shared that while they are generally aware that there are frameworks upholding their rights, they were less certain about the specifics of which international conventions and national laws and policies upheld women’s freedom of speech and participation in decision-making or political processes and how they could leverage those laws and policies to guarantee their rights. Women also admitted that they learned about the few international rights frameworks to which Nigeria is a signatory through workshops and other initiatives organized by NGOs such as Women for Women International.



There is a need for women to educate themselves, engage in economic activities and be conversant with the law that spells out the fundamental human right which will help.

(Woman respondent, Nigeria)



Despite the existence of formal rights frameworks to protect women’s participation, there are still informal barriers that are amplified by the patriarchal structure of society which may undermine those rights frameworks. Women’s own lack of awareness about existing laws at both the state and national levels can compound and sustain the dominance of patriarchal and traditional norms over formal legal rights. Therefore, there is a need for sustained sensitization to women and men about relevant laws and policies that protect and uphold women’s rights, including their right to participation.

Personal Confidence and Capabilities

Coupled with the importance of being aware of their rights to participate is women’s self-confidence in their ability to participate across formal and informal, private and public decision-making spaces.

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
1 “If a decision was made in a public forum which might negatively affect your life and those of your children, you would not hesitate to stand up and protest.”	16%	10%	29%	44%	1%
2 “Women like me are just as capable as men of contributing to community decision-making.”	10%	10%	34%	45%	1%
3 “Women like me are just as capable as men of contributing to national-level political decision-making.”	11%	11%	38%	36%	3%
4 “Women don’t mind speaking up in front of many people, even if the traditional leader is around.”	14%	12%	39%	31%	3%

Table 1

Across survey questions that explore women’s perceptions of their own capabilities (Table 1), most women agree that women are capable of community level decision-making (79% cumulatively either agree or strongly agree) and national level political decision-making (74% cumulatively either agree or strongly agree) and that women would speak up for their rights, even in the presence of a traditional leader (70% either agree or strongly agree). This suggests that women do have some belief in their capabilities around decision-making and that they ‘don’t mind’ speaking up publicly and would do so in cases of decisions that impact their lives or their children’s lives (73% cumulatively either agree or strongly agree).

Yet, women also identified that there are personal barriers beyond their self-belief that prevent them from fully participating. Women shared in FGDs and interviews that to act on their capabilities to participate publicly, they must first overcome feelings of social anxiety, fear, lack of courage or confidence, inexperience, and procrastination. They also shared that a lack of education or literacy can be a barrier to women's political participation because if a woman is not educated, then she may not have the confidence to express herself on issues that affect society nor effectively suggest solutions.

“

Illiteracy has subjected lots of women not to have the qualification to participate in certain issues in the community.

(Woman, Bachi Community)

”

In addition to the impact of a lack of education on women's personal confidence, women also shared that they feel uncomfortable participating in community dialogues, meetings, groups, or processes because they might be discriminated against for their low education level and be excluded or not be taken seriously within the group.

Women feel they are capable of speaking up, but often they feel overwhelmed and discouraged by the socially constructed barriers and stigma – driven by community attitudes and gender-discriminatory norms – that may face them if they do participate.

Community Attitudes and Norms

Barriers driven by patriarchal norms and upheld by community members or traditional leaders are important to untangle as women's responses made clear that there is a disconnect between women's own positive attitudes towards their own participation and capabilities versus their communities' acceptance of these positive attitudes.

In FGDs and interviews, women shared challenges related to community attitudes and norms which inhibit women's participation including:

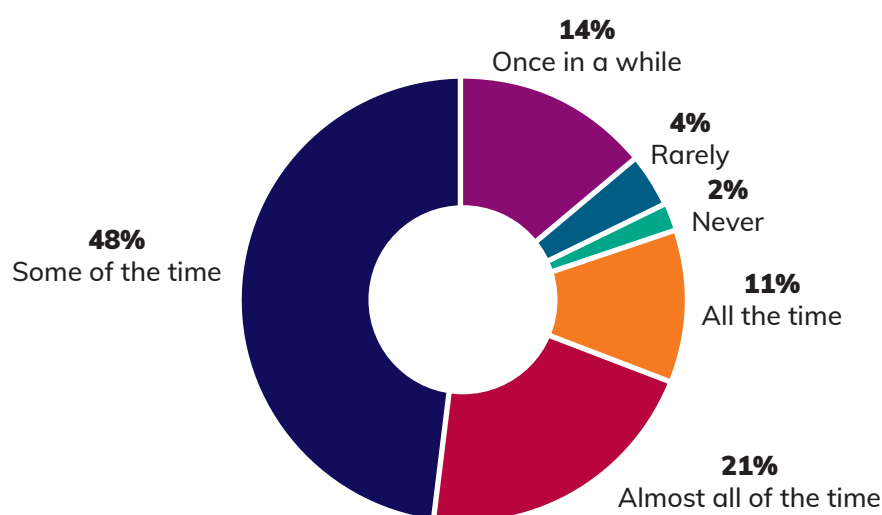
- Gender discrimination and stereotyping of women's roles;
- The precedence of cultural norms and traditional laws over state laws;
- Stigma and 'name-calling';
- Gender-based violence.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

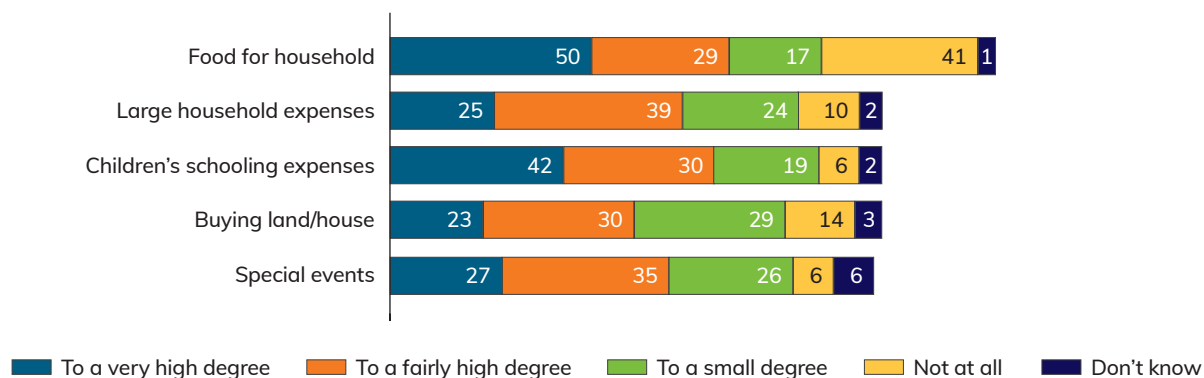
Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
1 "A wife should never question the decisions made by her husband."	54%	32%	10%	4%	0%
2 "A wife should be able to earn money through work outside the home."	5%	4%	45%	46%	0%
3 "Women should stay at home to take care of their kids."	51%	26%	11%	10%	3%
4 "Public forums held in my village are often closed to some people and it is difficult for a woman like me to stand up and voice any concerns."	28%	34%	25%	9%	4%
5 "Nowadays, women's opinions are valued in your community and are used to create policies."	9%	14%	44%	31%	1%
6 "A woman in my community has little voice in public discussions about the development opportunities."	15%	24%	37%	21%	3%
7 "It is the job of men to be leaders, not women."	52%	20%	8%	18%	1%
8 "Women can be good politicians and should be encouraged to stand in elections."	6%	5%	33%	55%	1%

HOW OFTEN DO YOU THINK YOUR HUSBAND LISTENS TO YOU AND RESPECTS YOUR OPINION?



Across household level decision-making, women surveyed largely responded that they did not agree with the notion that women should acquiesce to a husband's decision-making authority and never seek out a role outside of their homes. 86% of women cumulatively disagree that a wife should never question decisions made by her husband (Table 2, #1). 91% of women cumulatively agree that women should be able to earn money through work outside the home (Table 2, #2) and 77% of women surveyed cumulatively disagreed with the statement that women should stay at home and take care of the children (Table 2, #3). However, women shared in FGDs and interviews that community attitudes are often at odds with their own feelings about their roles as women. Women surveyed also responded that their husbands listened to and respected their opinions to varying degrees, but most women feel that their husbands listened 'some of the time' or less frequently.

THE DEGREE TO WHICH WOMEN RESPONDENTS FEEL THEY CAN MAKE THEIR OWN PERSONAL DECISIONS REGARDING THE IDENTIFIED ISSUES



Women perceive their decision-making power to be greatest around daily household expenses such as food or expenses for their children. They expressed less confidence in making larger household expenses or buying land.

“**Women are always considered to mostly function as those who should take care of the home front, while the men do other things like occupying leadership position and instructing the women on what to do.** (Woman, Jos-East LGA)”

Women shared in the FGDs that cultural norms and tradition often present women as inferior to men, despite laws and policies that guarantee certain levels of equality between them. One FGD participant stated, “Our environment and society only regard men’s opinion and not the woman’s.”

Women shared that culture and tradition present women as inferior to men and that social norms limit women’s place to the home and not as a political participant. These cultural norms or traditions often limit the role of women to the kitchen, childbearing and childcare, and domestic chores. At home, women bear the burden of all caregiving responsibilities and the tasks of taking care of their children and women say that their husbands “exert pressure on [their] time” which limits their capacity for active political participation.

“**I want to participate in politics, but I am financially handicapped, and the men seem to put aside the women even when such women are qualified, they are told culture does not permit women to rule men.** (Woman, Pankshin)”

There are also social norms that view the socializing between men and women negatively and more overt stigma around women attending events or meetings at night. Women say that the community members and leaders take advantage of such norms and hold community meetings or political events at night so that women will be discouraged from attending due to childcare responsibilities or to avoid being questioned as a 'prostitute' for going to a meeting with men at late hours.



In our community, the culture says where there are men; women should not be found there even during politics they fix meetings in the middle of the night so that women will not be able to participate. (Woman, Pankshin)



One woman shared that women in her community would be unable to effectively and safely carry out a leadership or campaigning role in politics even if they secured or achieved one, because the community would call her a prostitute if she had to work late into the evening due to party activities. Men also reinforce the negative perception of women participating in community or political activities that require them to stay out at night by threatening women with divorce for what they as husbands perceive to be transgressions of patriarchal norms and gender roles.



Men will say if you want to contest for political position then you should be thinking of going back to your parents.

(Woman, Pankshin)



Women surveyed disagreed that it is solely the responsibility of men to be leaders (Table 2, #6 – 72% cumulatively disagree), yet women shared in interviews that men “see women as weak persons, and that only the men are expected to lead in the community as it is a tradition for men to rule as the head of the family.” This view of men as the head of the family often inhibits women’s participation as the attitude translates from family structure to community leadership, particularly in communities where traditional customs supersede formal laws around women’s participation and leadership.

In addition to more explicit gender discriminatory norms, women described social norms that suggest women speaking up in their community could be perceived as being disrespectful to elders. This also prevents some women from taking more active roles in community groups or meetings and suggests that girls may face greater challenges even within women-only spaces when seeking to expand their community level participation.

Women say that these patriarchal social norms affect how women participate at the household and community level, as well as the political level. Community attitudes impact participation across the spectrum and while the barriers manifest differently, they share similar roots in norms and gender stereotypes and discrimination.

Gender-Based Violence

Women described the risk of gender-based violence and backlash they might face when they go against traditional norms by seeking to expand their participation, agency, and leadership in the home and in their community. Women described these risks as being particularly heightened for younger women and girls. Women and girls face different forms of GBV including technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), early child and forced marriage, and domestic violence. Women shared that family tensions that are driven by both cultural norms and efforts by women to push back against those norms can further drive increases in GBV incidence, and particularly intimate-partner violence.



My husband used to slap, beat and ask me to keep quiet whenever I wanted to correct him. Whenever I tell him that I want to contest for a political office or attend a political party meeting and rallies, he usually [calls me] a potential prostitute. (Woman, Riyom)



Women interviewed – particularly from WROs – also shared that women speaking publicly also find themselves subject to attacks online and on social media that include rape threats and gender-specific taunts.

Based on FGDs and interviews, the increased risks of GBV for women who speak out or are seen to defy traditional norms are deterrents for women in Plateau State considering whether to actively participate in decision-making spaces or in groups outside the home.

Economic Vulnerability

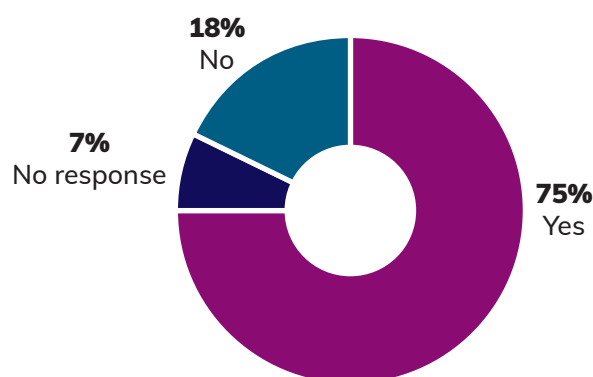
In FGDs, women from Riyom and Pankshin shared that their economic vulnerability prevents them from participating in community groups or activities. They describe economic vulnerability as both general financial constraints (i.e. low income or poverty) affecting their confidence in participating in political or community decision-making, and as gender disparities such as lack of land and asset ownership that reduces women's status in community discussions.



I am poor, my family members are poor and whenever we look at our position it demoralises us from participating in group activities. (Woman, Riyom)

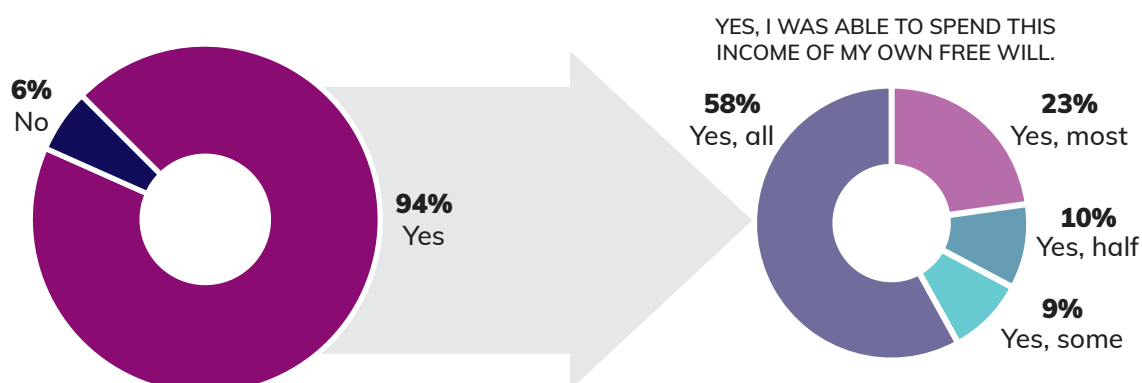


DO YOU CURRENTLY CONDUCT ANY INCOME GENERATING ACTIVITY (INFORMAL OR FORMAL)?



75% of women surveyed are involved in income generating activities outside of the home and are overcoming the previously discussed patriarchal norm that suggests women should not work outside the home. However, most of the occupations that women reported engaging in are informal or low-income activities such as farming (37% of women), small business (20%), and traders (9%), which aligns with the broader economic context in which approximately 85% of Nigerian women are engaged in 'vulnerable employment'. Women's 'vulnerable employment' can exacerbate their poverty and financial insecurity which they had expressed as a contributing factor to their feelings of discouragement and self-doubt around participating in community decision-making and activities.

DO YOU GET TO SPEND ANY OF THE INCOME YOU EARNED FROM THIS ACTIVITY OF YOUR OWN FREE WILL?



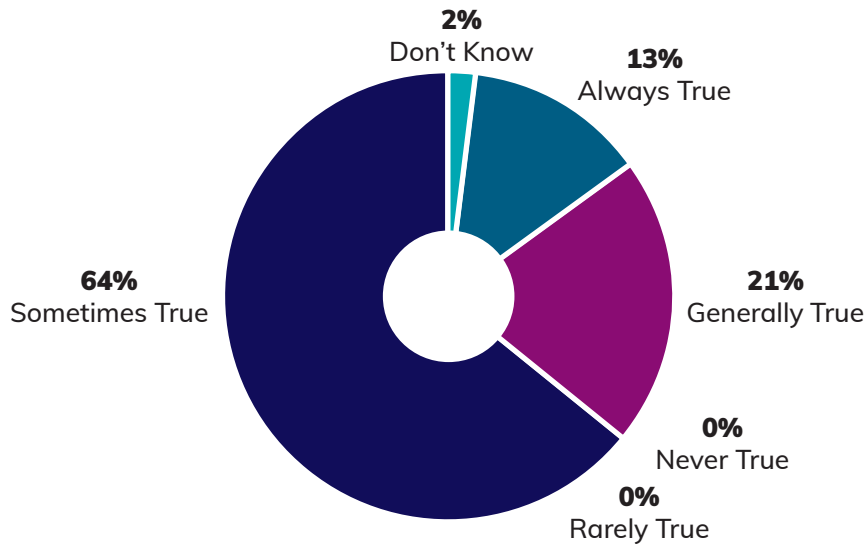
In addition to mostly being engaged in income-generating activities outside of the home, women surveyed indicated that they were mostly able to spend their income of their free will (94%), but to varying degrees.

In FGDs, women explained that because men and women alike were generally engaged in lower-income, subsistence economic activities, then the greater gender-based economic vulnerability they faced was through restrictions to their land rights and inheritance rights. Access to resources and land signifies wealth and status in Nigeria. Therefore, limiting women's access to their land further excludes them from community decision-making.

Institutional Constraints - Lack of government support

As highlighted in the context for this report, there is an underrepresentation of women participating in the leadership and management of both state and non-state institutions. In addition to addressing the limited awareness, lack of confidence, and discriminatory attitudes that pose barriers to women's participation, there is a need for national, state and local government and decision-making structures to actively create avenues and opportunities for women to participate. The following survey questions suggest how women perceive existing support from leaders.

IF WOMEN WANTED TO VOICE THEIR OPINION IN PUBLIC MEETINGS,
COMMUNITY LEADERS WOULD ENCOURAGE THEM TO DO SO.



Women surveyed indicated that community leaders would encourage women to voice their opinion in public meetings to varying degrees. Most women (64%) felt that it was 'sometimes' the case that community leaders would encourage women to voice their opinion, though 34% of women surveyed felt it was true more often.

However, in FGDs and interviews women shared experiences of being disregarded during meetings that suggest that they perhaps do not feel welcome in decision-making processes even if they are invited or encouraged to speak up or voice an opinion.



They say 'You - a woman; what do you know about peacebuilding? Who even allowed you to be part of this meeting? Keep your mouth close when men are talking.'

(Woman, Pankshin)

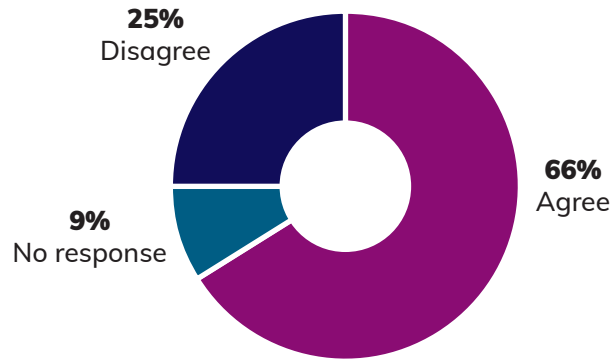


Another woman shared a comment she received during a community meeting: "We decide what should be done and what should not be done as far as we are the men."



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

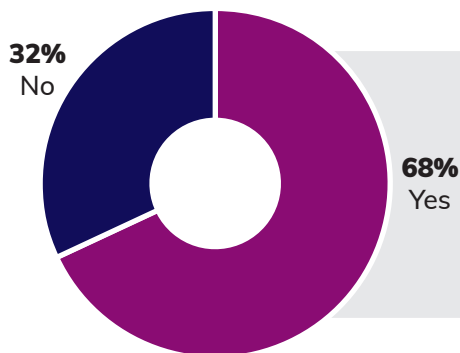
AS A COMMUNITY, WE ARE GENERALLY ABLE TO MAKE OUR POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES LISTEN TO OUR PROBLEMS.



There is a deliberate structuring of the political system in such a way that it is disadvantageous to women such as scheduling political meetings late at nights which cannot go down well with women who have their children to take care of. (FGD participant)



DID YOU EVER APPROACH OR ATTEMPT TO APPROACH A LOCAL LEADER ABOUT YOUR NEEDS OR VILLAGE/COMMUNITY ISSUES?



IF SO, WAS IT EASY TO MEET WITH THE LOCAL LEADER?

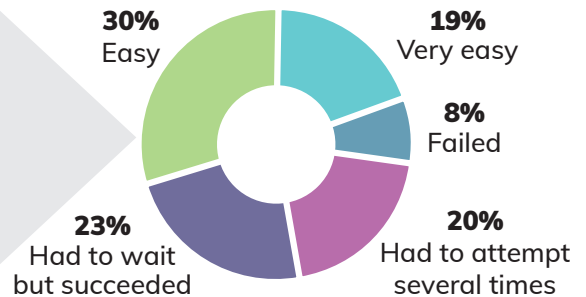


Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

Of the women surveyed, 68% attempted to approach a local leader to raise an issue and of those women who attempted to approach or meet a local leader, 92% were successful in securing a meeting, although 43% were only able to do so after a notable wait or after several attempts. This suggests that some local leaders have made themselves accessible to women since 49% found it 'easy' or 'very easy' to meet with them once they made an attempt to do so. However, since nearly one-third of women do not seek meetings with their local leaders in the first place, taking steps to reduce barriers and increase accessibility between women and their community leaders would be useful in encouraging women's participation and leading to more successful civic engagement with local leaders.

Civic Spaces and Opportunities for Women's Participation

Survey responses and discussions with women suggest that they overwhelmingly are aware of the importance of decision-making power and civic and political participation. They also are motivated and interested in achieving greater participation and power across the spectrum of participation and decision-making.

IN WHAT SPACES OR SITUATIONS DO YOU WISH TO HAVE MORE DECISION-MAKING POWER OR MORE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION?

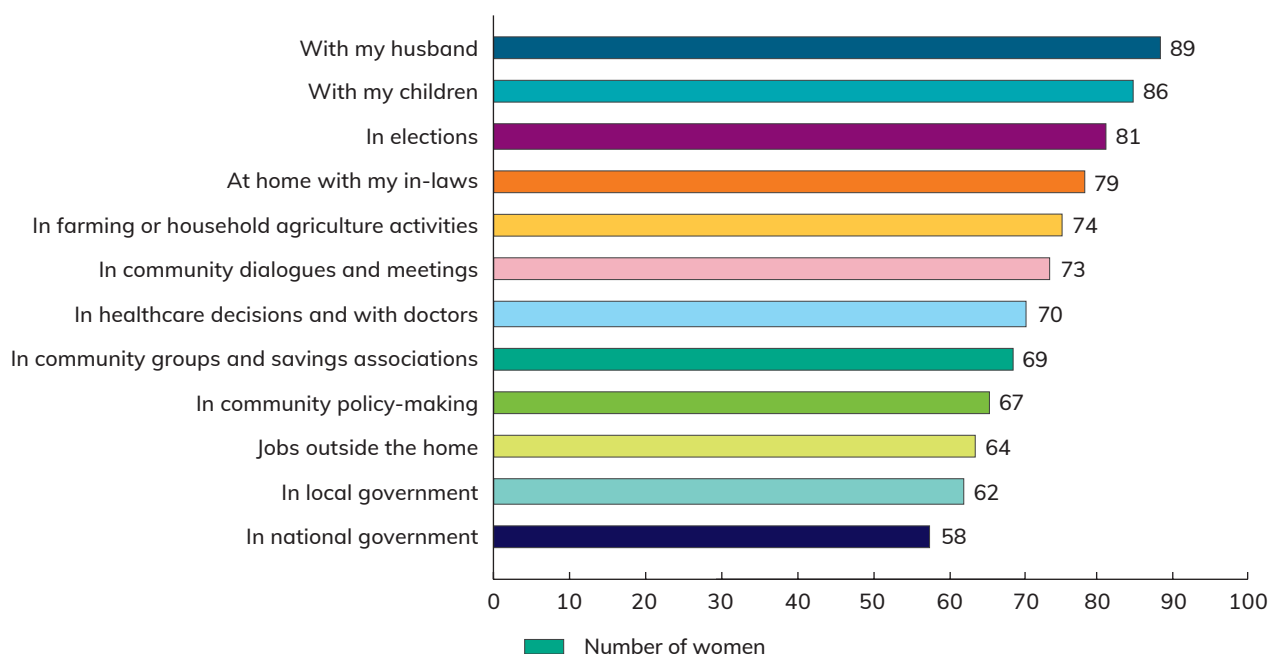


Figure 2

Many women desire greater decision-making power with their immediate family such as their husbands (89 out of 249 women), children (86 out of 249 women), and in-laws (79 out of 249 women). However, at a nearly equal level they also desire greater participation and decision-making power in public sphere activities such as elections (81 women), in economic activities such as farming (74 women), and community dialogues and meetings (73 women). Women also express interest in attaining greater power across other areas of their lives such as in their healthcare, community groups and savings associations, and in local and national government.

Women shared in FGDs and interviews that they are driven to participate and engage by their desire for a different future for their communities and the women in their communities. They wish to transform the realities and challenges they face including rising youth violence, land conflicts, the prevalence of GBV, poverty, deteriorating infrastructure, and a desire to increase education and scholarship opportunities for their children.



“I really wish I can provide scholarship to children of the poor to go to good schools especially the girls so that they can close the wide gap between men and women.

(Woman, Riyom)



Civic Spaces and Women’s Access

WHAT ARE YOUR MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES OR ACTIONS?

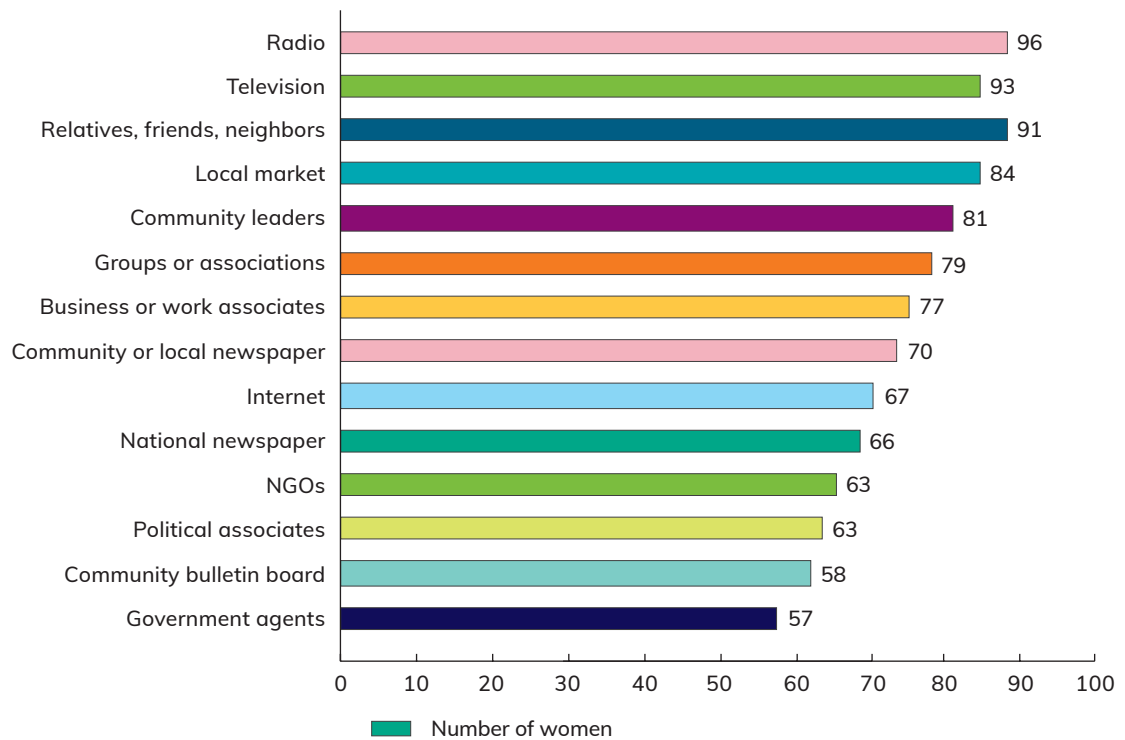


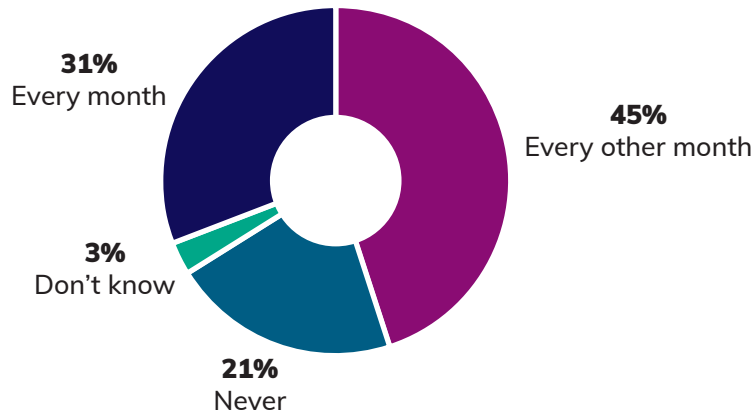
Figure 3: Women surveyed were asked to select from a list of options – including “other” – indicating sources of information they use for governmental or political updates.

Women use a variety of informational sources to find out about government activities and actions. The most prominent sources include traditional media such as radio and television, but also informal sources such as their relatives and friends and their local market. This suggests that many communities – especially rural communities like those in Plateau State where women do not tend to have wide access to technology or consistent internet connectivity - have not transitioned entirely to the internet for their political or government updates and that there is still value in using traditional media for messaging and sensitizing television and radio outlets to the issues of women’s participation and rights.

Additionally, women continue to receive information about civic issues from their family and other members and leaders of their community. It is therefore critical to address social norms and attitudes that affect the lens through which that information is interpreted and shared by members of the community as part of a holistic approach to increasing women’s participation.

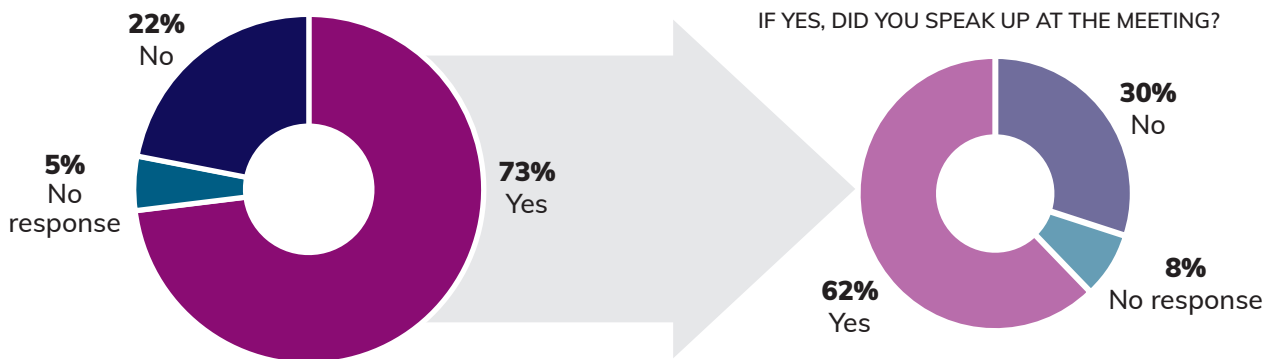
Community Participation – Support from Civil Society and WROs

HOW FREQUENTLY DO WOMEN DISCUSS POLITICS OR COMMUNITY MATTERS WITH PEOPLE OUTSIDE THEIR FAMILIES?



76% of women are discussing political and/or community issues outside of their family semi-frequently, though 21% of women are never discussing these issues outside of the home. This suggests that women are already leveraging civic spaces or social networks to discuss community issues which can provide an entry point to reaching them and encouraging their broader participation.

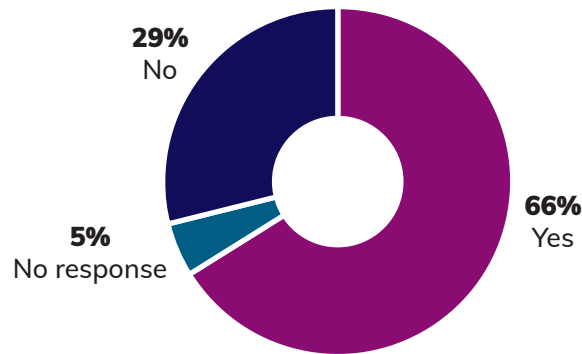
IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS, DID YOU ATTEND ANY VILLAGE/COMMUNITY MEETINGS?



In addition to discussing community matters outside the home, women are attending village and community meetings. Of the 73% of women who attended a meeting in the past year, 62% spoke up at the meeting. Consistent with their descriptions about the barriers they face in participating in such meetings, these women may be facing risks, backlash, and/or practical barriers by attending and speaking up at community meetings. 22% of women are deterred entirely from attending community meetings due to a combination of the barriers and challenges they face in doing so.



DO YOU PARTICIPATE IN A WOMEN'S GROUP OR COMMUNITY GROUPS?



66% of women surveyed are already participating in women's groups or community groups. FGDs and interviews suggest that women value such groups, particularly when the groups feel inclusive and can offer them networks of support or help in addressing the day to day challenges in their lives.

Women shared in FGDs and interviews that they hope for more resourcing of community groups and for WROs to increase the collaboration and consultation opportunities to encourage more women to share their voices and priorities.



The decision-making tables especially at the community levels and respective tiers of government is still male-dominated. We women would have loved to be incorporated as lawmakers at the community level but that has not been achieved.

(Woman, Jos-East)



Even as cultural norms limit the space for women's participation and activism, women from Plateau State share that they find their own civic spaces and use their own methods to strengthen their movements for peace. Women described specific and key issues that they have mobilized around in the past, including the "Black Wednesday" movement in Plateau State related to the "Bring Back our Girls" campaign.

With a shrinking civic space for women's organizations in Nigeria and limited funding landscape, women's groups have been using social media and online platforms to share their priorities. Young women and girls use X/Twitter and Facebook as key platforms to participate and influence political and public decision-making. Women and WROs suggest that sufficient resourcing combined with a multi-stakeholder and multi-platform approach to women's inclusion and participation could contribute to regional movement-building for women's rights and a more coordinated effort to ensure that women are participating effectively at community decision-making tables.

Peacebuilding

Even though community decision-making in Plateau state is predominantly led by men, there are spaces in both formal sectors at the local government level and in the more informal domestic sectors where women are carving out spaces for their voices to be heard and for their leadership in peace efforts.

At the local government level, key informant interviews in Jos East revealed that some women's groups are increasingly consulted as part of conflict-related early warning and response mechanisms. Women also have a significant role to play in supporting community sensitization around legislation surrounding women's rights to participate – including action plans relating to the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda.

Women described that they are often able to facilitate peacebuilding meetings within informal spaces through networks and organizations such as loan committees, mothers' groups, or community associations. At such 'informal' meetings and mediations, women are able to share detailed peace plans and recommendations that they feel more comprehensively address the interconnected societal issues affecting them and their communities. In these spaces, they feel more able to be honest and less beholden to interests of male-dominated political parties that control formal spaces. A participant from Bachi shared:



Women's participation in decision-making is crucial because they are at the receiving end of everything - conflict, violent abuses... in terms of peacebuilding, they are the ones at home with the children and because peace begins at home, they should be allowed to be part of peacebuilding at all levels.

(Woman, Jos East LGA)



Most respondents assert that women play a prominent role in bringing about peace in post-conflict societies. The systematic and representative inclusion of women in conflict resolution processes significantly increases the chances of sustainable peace. To emphasize this point, a participant from Riyom and Bachi said "We usually have the privilege to attend meetings that concern peace and we contribute in ways that will bring peace to the community."

Political Participation



Political participation is how people or community engages in selecting or making a decision on who should be elected to represent the people using various political platforms.

(Woman, Angware community)



In FGDs and interviews, women described their engagement in electoral and political campaigns as part of their political participation and women-led NGOs shared that they have mobilized campaigns to encourage women's participation in elections.

Women also shared that they feel they can participate in voting and election campaign activities. However, they feel that they are unable to access leadership positions within political parties or set the agendas and make meaningful decisions during campaigns or around party platforms.



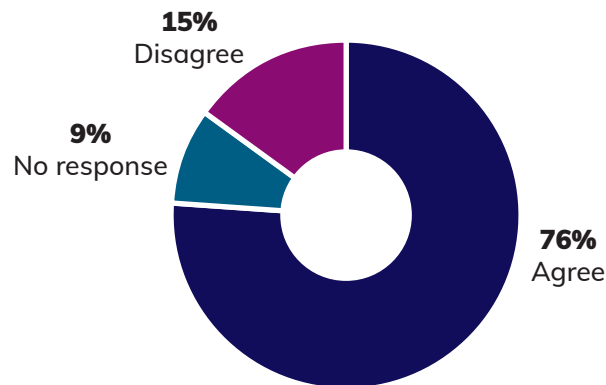
Political participation is the freedom to vote and be voted for.

(Woman, Pankshin community)



Positive representation and role models

“COMPARED TO A FEW YEARS AGO, THERE ARE NOW MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN YOUR POSITION TO BECOME INFLUENTIAL ACTORS IN HOW YOUR COMMUNITY IS GOVERNED.”



As well as the desire and hope to build on existing civic spaces to expand their participation, women in FGDs shared that seeing women leaders in decision-making roles as role models is a major driver for motivating women to be involved in local politics and peacebuilding themselves. Examples of the women leaders that have inspired and motivated women involved in this research included:

- women leaders in religious institutions;
- political office holders;
- the wives of local leaders;
- female politicians;
- female philanthropists; and
- community associations.

Participants also identified key qualities of role models that motivate them including their mentorship skills, their knowledge of current events and issues in the community, their work ethic, and their leadership positions.

Women leaders in Nigeria typically place emphasis on the rights, development, and well-being of women and children and can elevate such issues to policymaking spaces and enact practical solutions.⁴⁸ Women also perceive that women’s participation in politics and proximity to political power has played a role in reducing gendered violence in Nigeria in the past. For example, Titi Abubakar – Nigeria’s former second Lady – advocated and pushed for the first legislation in Nigeria to address and end human trafficking.⁴⁹

Women also shared examples of organizations doing positive work and setting examples for inclusive approaches to removing barriers to women's participation through activities such as providing financial loans to empower its members who are mostly disabled women or supporting women in the payment of their children's school fees. By championing an inclusive collective approach to women's leadership, these organizations are contributing to movement building for women in Plateau State by opening opportunities for women to participate within a restricted and challenging conflict-affected external environment.

Women are already leveraging existing civic spaces to expand their participation and to increase their awareness about community issues and their rights to participate. Efforts to uphold and increase women's participation in communities like those in Plateau State should protect these spaces and invest in these pathways that women are already utilizing.

“

For me, women are active participants only when it comes to voting but when it comes to decision-making, we are not allowed to be active participants. (Woman, Pankshin)

”



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

Conclusion

Women in Plateau State shared with us their motivation to participate in decision-making that affects their lives at the household, community, and national levels. Women are aware of their rights to participation and most feel that they are just as capable as men of contributing to society. Despite their awareness, motivation, and confidence in their own ability, they are less certain of whether they will succeed in overcoming the barriers they face.

These barriers include traditional social norms, gender discrimination, and stigma which often supersede the enforcement of the policies and laws which protect women's rights to participate in community groups, activities, or decision-making.

Women in Nigeria, especially in rural communities such as those in Plateau State, are also affected by poverty and a lack of education, which reduces their confidence to participate for fear of being discriminated against or dismissed in community groups and meetings for being poor or illiterate.

Nigeria, and particularly Plateau State, also continue to be affected by conflict which can create barriers to women's rights and their participation, but peacebuilding also offers an important entry point for women's participation. Government and NGOs should proactively work to support women's participation by creating opportunities for women's participation at every level and removing barriers to women's participation through holistic programs that transform harmful, patriarchal social norms and increase women's financial security, education, and confidence to participate in decision-making.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

Recommendations

1. Programming and approaches

WRO interviews and FGDs have shown that with adequate resourcing and investment, programs that transform community attitudes to women's rights open up space for their meaningful inclusion, leadership and decision-making. These programs should take a holistic, locally-led approach to ensure that women and communities are included in creating and sustaining practices that support women's participation. Programs should support the diversity of women's experiences that include trainings and workshops that support women's economic independence, self-confidence, and education.

- Women's participation programs must address harmful social norms and community attitudes that prevent women from participating in public life or exercising their decision-making power inside and outside of the home.
- Ensure that programs are designed with an intersectional lens to ensure that women with disabilities, girls and young women, those with different ethnic and religious backgrounds can access interventions. This should also ensure that program include components on diverse role models as this research has shown that **positive representation** is a driver for women's inclusion in community and national decision-making spaces.
- Take a **context-specific approach** to program design and advocacy. As this research has shown, the conflict dynamics in Plateau State are unique to the region and amplified by rises in climate change, economic insecurity, and gender inequality. These conflict dynamics must be woven into all future programming design and implementation components.

2. Protecting civic space and local infrastructure

Globally, women's rights are being rolled back with increasing threats of violence and fewer spaces available for women to come together. As this research has revealed, protected civic space at the community, state, and government level can open up opportunities for movements for women's rights and inclusion. Civic space across Nigeria should be protected and be made inclusive to enable individual women's participation and collective advocacy and movement building for women's rights and participation.

- Strengthen and **invest in existing networks and coalitions** for women's rights to increase opportunities for peer exchange with other WROs within and across Nigeria. This will enable **further movement building, joint coordination, and solidarity** opportunities for WROs defending women's rights and their participation in Nigeria.
- Given the rising cases of technology-facilitated-GBV, **invest in and protect online spaces** that provide new and accessible opportunities for women to participate and lead in.
- Encourage and facilitate **opportunities for inter-agency collaboration**; this includes working with local leaders, governments, community police departments and governors offices to build allies in decision-making spaces that can facilitate women's meaningful inclusion and participation in Nigeria.
- Protect, uphold and strengthen safe spaces for WROs and CSOs to enable program adaptations, trainings, workshops and dialogue sessions. This should include investments into **local infrastructure** like schools, universities and government institutions that can support women's meaningful inclusion.
- **Demonstrate strong political will** and funding support to non-state actors and WROs implementing policies related to women's freedom of speech and ensure meaningful representation of women in election campaigns and in local government decision-making spaces to promote women's participation.⁵⁰
- Advocate for **increased access and financial support to global forums** and events outside of Nigeria to provide women's rights organisations and women human rights defenders opportunities to share about the shrinking space and rollback of women's rights in Nigeria.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

3. Livelihoods and economic security

Women are overrepresented in the informal economy in Nigeria, meaning many have little to no economic security. The external environment in Nigeria, complicated by the confluence of conflict, social norms and restrictions on resources has a significant impact on women's livelihoods. As this research has shown, economic decision-making in the household and community is a route to meaningful inclusion and participation for women in Nigeria.

Recommendations for: governments, donors, INGOS, WROs

- Integrate **economic security and empowerment into all programs** and policies related to women's participation and inclusion in Nigeria.
- Encourage and prioritize a **diversity of economic opportunities for women beyond the informal economy including in local politics, the private sector and education systems** that provide greater opportunities for women to be involved in state level decision-making. This includes investing in scholarships for women and girls to ensure they have equal access to higher education.
- Invest and **fund local politics including election campaigns** to ensure that women involved and employed in the informal economy have the capacity to engage and participate in election campaigns and local politics.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

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