



RELIGION, CULTURE, AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Kayode Stephen Olaiya¹

Tunji Lucas Alogi²

¹Department of English Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria

Olaiyaks@afued.edu.ng¹

²Department of History, Federal College of Education, Ilawe-Ekiti, Nigeria

alogitunji@gmail.com²

Abstract

Women's political participation in Northern Nigeria remains constrained by the intersecting forces of religious authority and cultural normativity, yet the precise mechanisms through which these forces operate across diverse forms of civic engagement remain inadequately theorized and empirically under-examined. This study investigates how Islamic religious discourse and patriarchal cultural norms shape, restrict, and, in specific contexts, facilitate women's political engagement in Northern Nigeria, with particular attention to participatory pathways beyond formal electoral candidacy. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study draws on sixty in-depth interviews with women political activists, religious leaders, and community elders, as well as twelve focus-group discussions conducted with women's organizations, youth groups, and mixed-gender community associations across urban and rural settings in three purposively selected states. Data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, guided by feminist political theory, social norms theory, and constructivist approaches to religion and political behaviour. Findings reveal that religious institutions function not as monolithic barriers but as contingent forces whose enabling or constraining effects depend on doctrinal framing, clerical leadership orientation, and the degree to which women's participation is rhetorically anchored in Islamic values of justice ('adl), communal welfare (maslaha), and public service. Cultural norms similarly operate as dual structures: while they restrict women's candidacy and formal leadership through patriarchal household arrangements and gendered spatial norms, kinship networks, women's associations, and faith-based community organizations provide informal yet consequential platforms for voter education, mobilization, and policy advocacy. The study contributes to theories of gender and democratization in sub-Saharan Africa by demonstrating that women's political agency is contingent, negotiated, and context-specific shaped by the interaction of education, economic autonomy, social networks, and interpretive religious leadership. These findings challenge monolithic framings of religion and culture as static barriers and offer evidence-based recommendations for faith-sensitive, locally adapted governance reforms.

Keywords: women's political participation; religion and politics; Northern Nigeria; gender norms; qualitative research; Islamic governance; democratic inclusion; feminist political theory

1. Introduction

Northern Nigeria constitutes one of the most analytically complex environments for the study of gender and political participation in sub-Saharan Africa. The region is characterized by the simultaneous operation of formal democratic institutions, customary governance structures, and a pervasive Islamic socio-religious order that significantly influences normative expectations regarding women's roles in public life. Despite notable gains in women's political representation at the federal level, northern states continue to record the lowest rates of female candidacy, electoral turnout, and civic office holding in the country (Adamu & Merry, 2021; Galadima, 2022). These persistent disparities have attracted scholarly attention, yet much of the existing work frames religion and culture exclusively as barriers, overlooking the ways in which the same institutional formations may, under specific conditions, serve as resources for political mobilization.

The present study takes as its point of departure the observation that women in Northern Nigeria engage with politics through a wide range of channels that extend well beyond formal electoral candidacy including voter education, community organizing, policy advocacy, and participation in faith-based governance networks. Understanding how religious and cultural frameworks shape this full spectrum of engagement is essential, not only for theories of democratization and gender justice in Africa, but also for the design of effective governance interventions in religiously plural settings. The study is guided by the following research questions:

(i) How do Islamic religious discourse and cultural norms interact to shape women's political participation in Northern Nigeria?

(ii) What forms of political engagement do women undertake beyond electoral candidacy, and what structural and social factors predict these forms of engagement?

(iii) What barriers and enabling conditions affect women's political agency within different religious and cultural configurations?

(iv) Which community-level strategies have demonstrated efficacy in expanding inclusive political participation for women in Northern Nigerian contexts?

The study addresses a significant gap in the scholarly literature. While existing research has documented structural barriers to women's formal political leadership in Northern Nigeria, comparatively little attention has been paid to the informal, grassroots, and faith-mediated forms

of engagement through which women exert political influence. Furthermore, the prevailing tendency to treat religion and culture as undifferentiated obstacles obscures the internal diversity of Islamic interpretation and the heterogeneity of cultural norms across ethnic, generational, and spatial lines. This study responds to these gaps by employing a qualitative methodology designed to capture the experiential complexity of women's political lives, attending to both the constraints they navigate and the agencies they exercise.

Theoretically, the analysis is anchored in three intersecting frameworks: feminist political economy, which situates women's participation within material and structural conditions of power; social norms theory, which attends to the normative pressures governing political behaviour; and constructivist approaches to religion and culture, which treat these as dynamic, contested, and subject to reinterpretation rather than as fixed systems of constraint. Together, these frameworks provide the conceptual tools necessary to trace how norms, identities, and institutions interact to produce varied patterns of women's political engagement across different community contexts.

The practical significance of this inquiry is equally substantial. Gender-inclusive governance is a constitutive element of democratic legitimacy and sustainable development, and Northern Nigeria's democratic trajectory will be shaped in part by whether women are meaningfully incorporated into political life at local, state, and federal levels. By identifying the conditions under which religious and cultural institutions facilitate rather than obstruct women's participation, this study aims to provide actionable knowledge for policymakers, development practitioners, faith-based organisations, and civil society actors seeking to advance inclusive governance without reproducing paternalistic or culturally dissonant interventions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Women's Political Participation in Nigeria: An Overview

The literature on women's political participation in Nigeria documents a persistent pattern of structural exclusion from formal political institutions, rooted in colonial legacies of gendered governance, post-independence patriarchal state formation, and the consolidation of customary and religious law in public life (Tripp, 2015; Nwankwor, 2014). Nigeria's federal structure complicates this picture: constitutional guarantees of gender equality coexist with a plurality of religious and customary legal regimes that differently regulate women's civic status across states.

In the north, the introduction of Sharia-based penal codes in twelve states from 2000 onward restructured public life in ways that, while primarily targeting criminal law, carried significant symbolic weight regarding women's place in the public sphere (Galadima, 2022; Kendhammer, 2016).

Despite these structural challenges, scholarship increasingly documents women's political resilience through informal channels. Nwankwor (2014) demonstrates that women's political agency in Nigeria is not confined to electoral candidacy but extends through party mobilization, community advocacy, and religious associational life. Adamu and Merry (2021) similarly find that women in northern states engage extensively in voter education and civil society activism, often through women's wings of political parties and Islamic women's associations (Jama'atu Nasril Islam and Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria). These findings underscore the importance of a broad conceptualization of political participation one that encompasses what Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) identify as a continuum of civic activities, from voting and campaigning to community problem-solving and contacting public officials.

2.2 Religion, Authority, and Women's Public Roles

Religion constitutes one of the most influential determinants of political behaviour in Northern Nigeria, functioning through both formal institutional channels mosques, Islamic courts, religious education networks—and informal normative pressures embedded in community life. The relationship between Islamic authority and women's political participation is, however, deeply contested and contextually variable. Classical Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) contains divergent positions on women's eligibility for leadership, and contemporary Muslim scholars in Northern Nigeria have staked out positions ranging from conservative restriction to progressive endorsement of women's civic roles (Galadima, 2022; Loimeier, 2016).

Kendhammer (2016) argues persuasively that the relationship between Islam and democracy in Nigeria is not one of inherent incompatibility but of ongoing negotiation, with ordinary Muslims frequently invoking Islamic frameworks of consultation (shura), justice ('adl), and community welfare (maslaha) in support of inclusive governance. This observation has direct

implications for understanding women's participation: when religious leaders frame civic engagement as a form of Islamically sanctioned public service, women's involvement acquires legitimacy that may otherwise be withheld. Conversely, when religious authority is deployed to enforce gender segregation in public spaces or to stigmatize women who seek leadership positions, it constitutes a substantive barrier to participation (Adamu & Merry, 2021). The contingent nature of religious influences its dependence on interpretive agency, leadership orientation, and political context represents a central theoretical contribution of this study.

2.3 Cultural Norms, Gender, and Political Space

Cultural norms surrounding gender roles in Northern Nigeria are best understood as heterogeneous, contested, and historically dynamic rather than as monolithic or static. *Purdah* norms, which restrict women's public mobility in certain Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri communities, constitute perhaps the most frequently cited cultural barrier to women's political participation (Callaway, 1987; Baba, 2018). However, the empirical significance of *purdah* as a political constraint varies considerably across generational, class, and spatial lines: Baba (2018) finds that younger, urban, educated women increasingly contest restrictive interpretations of *purdah*, while Sule and Muraina (2022) document its declining salience in peri-urban settings undergoing rapid economic transformation.

At the same time, cultural life in Northern Nigeria provides important resources for women's political engagement. Kinship networks, women's market associations, and informal community leadership structures constitute forms of social capital that enable women to participate in civic life without necessarily challenging dominant gender norms (Nwankwor, 2014). The literature on African women's informal politics (Tripp, 2015; Mama, 2020) highlights that women frequently exercise significant influence over governance outcomes through channels that do not register in conventional measures of political participation a finding that calls for methodological sensitivity to informal and associational politics.

2.4 The Significance of the Study

Despite a growing body of scholarship on gender and politics in Northern Nigeria, significant gaps persist. First, the majority of existing studies focus on formal electoral participation and candidacy, neglecting the full spectrum of civic engagement through which women exercise political agency. Second, religion and culture are frequently conceptualized as

monolithic barriers, obscuring the internal diversity of Islamic interpretation and the heterogeneity of cultural norms across ethnic, class, and generational lines. Third, qualitative, locally grounded studies that document the lived experience of women navigating religious and cultural constraints remain relatively scarce, particularly in comparison with quantitative or policy-oriented research. The present study addresses these gaps by adopting an interpretivist, qualitative methodology that centres women's own accounts of their political lives and the mechanisms through which they navigate, contest, and strategically leverage religious and cultural norms in pursuit of political agency.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative research design, grounded in an interpretivist epistemological orientation. The choice of a qualitative approach reflects the study's core aim: to understand how women in Northern Nigeria subjectively experience, interpret, and navigate the religious and cultural forces that shape their political engagement. Qualitative inquiry is particularly well suited to this objective because it prioritizes depth over breadth, attends to the complexity of lived experience, and allows for the emergence of context-specific categories that may not be captured by predetermined survey instruments or statistical models (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study draws on feminist qualitative methodology, which foregrounds power relations, attends to the situatedness of knowledge, and treats research participants as epistemic agents rather than merely as data sources (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

3.2 Study Sites and Sampling

The study was conducted across three states in Northern Nigeria of Borno, Taraba and Sokoto purposively selected to represent variation along three dimensions: (i) dominant religious and ethnic composition (predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulani; predominantly Muslim Kanuri; ethnically mixed with significant Muslim and Christian populations); (ii) degree of urbanization (state capitals, secondary towns, and rural communities); and (iii) recent political history with respect to women's candidacy and civic mobilization. Within each state, urban, peri-urban, and rural research sites were identified in consultation with local civil society partners, ensuring that the sample captured the spatial heterogeneity of women's political experience.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the inclusion of women with direct experience of political engagement including formal candidates, party activists, voter educators, community organizers, and NGO/faith-based organisation members as well as religious leaders, traditional chiefs, and community elders with knowledge of local governance and gender norms. Snowball sampling extended the network of participants, particularly in rural areas where women political actors are less visible to outside researchers. A total of sixty in-depth interviews and twelve focus-group discussions were conducted. Focus groups included women's organisations, youth groups, and mixed-gender community associations, with each group comprising six to ten participants. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved the point at which additional participants yielded no substantially new thematic insights (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through two primary methods. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual participants, guided by a flexible interview protocol designed to elicit accounts of: personal experiences with political engagement; interpretations of Islamic teachings regarding women's roles in public life; family and community responses to women's political activity; experiences of support and resistance; and perceptions of enabling and constraining conditions. Interviews lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes, were conducted in Hausa, Kanuri, or English according to participants' preferences, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. Professional translators assisted with non-English interviews, with transcripts subsequently back-translated for verification.

Focus-group discussions were conducted using a discussion guide that encouraged collective reflection on community norms, intergenerational differences, and the social dynamics of women's political involvement. Focus groups were single-gender or mixed-gender depending on the composition of the relevant organisation, and each session was facilitated by a trained local research assistant with experience in qualitative community research. Field notes were maintained throughout data collection to record non-verbal cues, group dynamics, and contextual observations. Data collection was conducted over a period of seven months, spanning two electoral cycles gubernatorial by-elections and local government council elections—allowing the research

team to observe how women's political activity intensified and shifted in response to specific electoral events.

3.4 Data Analysis

All interview and focus-group transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as described by Braun and Clarke (2021). RTA was selected because it allows for both inductive and deductive engagement with the data, enabling the research team to identify patterns grounded in participants' accounts while also attending to theoretically salient dimensions of the analysis. The analytical process proceeded through six phases: familiarization with the data through repeated reading; initial code generation; theme development through iterative clustering of codes; theme review and refinement; theme definition and naming; and the production of the analytic narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Coding was conducted using ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software to manage the large volume of transcripts. A structured codebook was developed collaboratively by the research team, combining a priori codes derived from the theoretical framework including codes related to religious framing, patriarchal norms, social networks, and forms of engagement with emergent codes arising from the data. Inter-coder reliability was established through double-coding of fifteen percent of transcripts, with discrepancies discussed and resolved through team deliberation. Cross-case comparison across sites was employed to identify shared patterns as well as site-specific variations, and member-checking was conducted with a subset of twelve participants to verify the resonance of preliminary findings with their experiences.

4. Findings

4.1 Religion as a Contingent, Contested Force

The findings challenge any simple characterization of Islamic religion as a barrier to women's political participation. Across all three research states of Borno, Taraba and Sokoto, participants including women activists, religious leaders, and community elders described religious discourse as a dynamic and contested terrain, whose political implications for women's participation depended heavily on who was interpreting it, in what institutional context, and toward what ends. This finding aligns with Kendhammer's (2016) argument that Islam in Northern Nigeria operates as an idiom through which diverse and often competing claims about governance and

social order are negotiated, rather than as a fixed normative code that uniformly prescribes women's political exclusion.

In communities where mosque leadership was aligned with reformist or Salafi educational networks, women's candidacy was more likely to be explicitly discouraged on doctrinal grounds, with Friday sermons occasionally referencing classical fiqh positions against female leadership of men. In these settings, women described navigating public expectations of political passivity even as they continued to engage actively in voter education and community advocacy activities that were less conspicuous and therefore less subject to clerical scrutiny. A women's ward party organizer in one urban site reflected: "We work behind the scene because that way no one will say we are disobeying our husbands or our faith. But we are the ones bringing out the voters."

By contrast, in communities where mosque leadership drew on the tradition of Islamic social activism associated with the Izala movement's emphasis on civic education, women's participation in voter education, community organizing, and advocacy was actively encouraged and publicly legitimated. Several religious leaders interviewed for this study invoked the concept of *maslaha* (public interest) to argue that women's civic engagement contributes to the welfare of the Muslim community and is therefore not only permitted but obligatory. One senior Islamic scholar stated: "Allah has not created woman only for the kitchen. If she has the knowledge and the will to serve her community, this is her duty, not her shame." Such framings provided women with religiously sanctioned rationales for public engagement that could be mobilized against patriarchal objections within their households and communities.

4.2 Cultural Norms: Dual Structures of Constraint and Enablement

Cultural norms, like religious discourse, emerged from the data as structures with contradictory implications for women's political agency. Patriarchal household arrangements—including practices of spousal veto over women's public activities, expectations of domestic priority, and in some contexts modified *purdah* norms—constituted the most consistently cited barriers to women's formal political engagement across all three research sites. Women who had sought or considered electoral candidacy described facing intense pressure from male relatives, mothers-in-law, and community opinion leaders. The social cost of candidacy was described as qualitatively different from the social cost of other forms of political participation, with candidacy construed as a direct challenge to the gendered division of public and private life.

Yet participants also articulated how cultural structures specifically kinship networks, women's market associations, and informal community leadership roles created pathways for political influence that did not require navigating the social penalties associated with formal candidacy. Through these channels, women organized voter registration drives, disseminated health and governance information, brokered relationships between community members and local government officials, and mobilized collective responses to public issues such as water access, school quality, and security. A women's group leader in Baga community in Borno state described her role: "I do not stand for election, but when the local government chairman wants to know what women want, he comes to me. I have been doing this for fifteen years." This form of informal political authority, grounded in cultural recognition of women's associational leadership, represents a significant but analytically undervalued dimension of women's political engagement.

Generational and spatial variation was a recurring theme in participants' accounts. Younger women in urban settings more frequently described contesting restrictive interpretations of cultural norms, leveraging digital communication platforms to coordinate politically, and drawing on higher levels of formal education to expand their perceived options. Older women in rural communities more consistently described working within existing cultural frameworks using kinship authority and associational networks rather than challenging gender norms directly. Both strategies produced political engagement, but of qualitatively different kinds and with different implications for norm change.

4.3 Pathways of Political Engagement Beyond Candidacy

A consistent finding across all research sites was that women's political engagement is not reducible to electoral candidacy and that the most widespread forms of participation were informal, associational, and community-based. Voter education emerged as the most commonly reported form of political activity, with women describing their roles as informal educators—explaining voting procedures, encouraging registration, and countering electoral apathy within their household and neighborhood networks. Mobilization for party events—including campaign rallies, ward meetings, and voter drives was also widely reported, often through women's wings of the major political parties.

Faith-based organisations provided an important institutional platform for women's civic engagement that was not necessarily framed as political in participants' own accounts but that had

significant political implications. Women's branches of Islamic organisations, such as the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN), served as spaces for leadership development, civic education, and collective advocacy on issues including girls' education, maternal health, and local governance accountability. These organisations allowed women to cultivate civic skills and public authority within a religiously legitimated framework, which in turn reduced the social costs of engagement.

4.4 Education, Economic Autonomy, and Social Networks as Enabling Conditions

Across the data, three enabling conditions were consistently associated with higher levels and wider ranges of political engagement: formal education, economic autonomy, and access to dense social networks. Education emerged as the single most consistently enabling factor in participants' accounts. Educated women described feeling more confident in public spaces, better equipped to engage with bureaucratic and political processes, and more capable of countering culturally grounded objections to their participation. Education also appears to function as a buffer against the constraining effects of conservative religious framing, enabling women to access alternative interpretations of Islamic texts and to articulate their civic activities in religiously defensible terms.

Economic autonomy understood as independent income, control over household resources, and freedom from financial dependence on male relatives was identified by participants as a precondition for political engagement in several important respects. Women with independent incomes were better positioned to absorb the time costs of political activity, to contribute financially to campaigns and community events, and to resist spousal or family pressure by virtue of their reduced material dependence. This finding resonates with feminist political economy's emphasis on the material basis of political agency (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Mama, 2020) and underscores the importance of integrating economic empowerment initiatives into strategies for advancing women's political inclusion.

Social networks including women's associations, informal kinship ties, religious organisations, and civil society groups functioned as critical channels for information, mentorship, solidarity, and collective mobilizations. Women who described themselves as politically active consistently cited network membership as a formative influence on their engagement, providing them with role models, practical knowledge, and the social cover necessary to participate in public

political life without triggering the full weight of community disapproval. The density and political relevance of a woman's social network was, in several cases, more predictive of her range of political activities than either her level of education or her economic status, suggesting that associational life constitutes a relatively autonomous pathway to political agency.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study make several contributions to the scholarly understanding of religion, culture, and women's political participation in Northern Nigeria and, more broadly, to theories of gender and democratization in sub-Saharan Africa. The central theoretical implication is that religion and culture operate neither as monolithic barriers nor as simple enablers, but as contingent structural forces whose political effects for women are mediated by interpretive agency, institutional context, and the material and social resources available to individual women. This argument extends Kendhammer's (2016) constructivist account of Islam and democracy in Nigeria by demonstrating its applicability specifically to gender dynamics, and complements Tripp's (2015) comparative analysis of African women's activism by grounding it in the specific religious and cultural landscape of Northern Nigeria.

The finding that religious legitimation constitutes a critical enabling condition for women's participation has significant theoretical implications. It suggests that the relationship between religious authority and women's political agency is not primarily structural determined by the formal doctrinal positions of Islamic jurisprudence but rather discursive and relational, shaped by the interpretive choices of religious leaders and the social dynamics through which religious discourse circulates in specific communities. This implies that interventions targeting religious leadership specifically, engagement with imams, Islamic scholars, and faith-based organisation leaders to promote inclusive interpretations of Islamic civic obligation may have greater leverage in expanding women's political participation than legal or regulatory reforms alone, at least in the short to medium term.

The study's attention to informal and associational forms of political engagement significantly broadens the conceptual and empirical scope of women's political participation as understood in the Northern Nigeria context. The literature on women's politics in Africa has progressively recognised the importance of informal political spaces (Mama, 2020; Tripp, 2015), and this study contributes empirical depth to that recognition by documenting the specific

mechanisms through which kinship networks, faith-based organisations, and women's associations enable women to exercise civic influence without exposing themselves to the full social costs of formal political candidacy. This finding has implications for measurement: studies that rely exclusively on candidacy and office holding as indicators of women's political engagement will systematically underestimate the extent of women's political activity in Northern Nigeria.

The role of education as a consistent enabling factor is consistent with a broad cross-national literature on the relationship between education and political participation (Verba et al., 1995; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), but the study adds a context-specific dimension by showing that education operates not only through cognitive and resource pathways but also through religious interpretive ones enabling women to access alternative framings of Islamic civic duty that legitimate their participation. This finding suggests that investments in girls' and women's education in Northern Nigeria are likely to have long-term political returns, and that civic and religious literacy components within educational curricula could amplify these effects.

6. Recommendations

The findings of this study generate a set of evidence-based recommendations directed at policymakers, faith-based organisations, civil society actors, and development practitioners working to advance women's political inclusion in Northern Nigeria.

First, engagement with religious leadership should be prioritized as a strategic entry point for advancing women's civic participation. Programmes that support the development of inclusive Islamic frameworks for civic engagement drawing on established concepts of *maslaha*, *'adl*, and *shura* are likely to prove more sustainable and culturally resonant than approaches that frame women's political participation primarily in secular liberal terms. Interfaith dialogue platforms and imam training programmes that incorporate gender justice perspectives represent concrete vehicles for this engagement.

Second, policy and programming interventions should adopt a broad conceptualization of women's political participation, one that encompasses voter education, community organizing, advocacy, and faith-based civic engagement alongside formal candidacy and office holding. This broader framing would support the recognition and resourcing of the informal political work that

women are already performing, while gradually creating conditions for their expanded access to formal political roles.

Third, investments in girls' and women's education, literacy, and civic empowerment should be recognised as foundational prerequisites for women's political inclusion. These investments should be explicitly connected to leadership and governance skills development, ensuring that the cognitive and communicative resources acquired through formal education is channeled into civic participation. Economic empowerment programmes, including microfinance and vocational training, should similarly incorporate governance and civic engagement components to maximize their political returns.

Fourth, the institutional infrastructure of women's associational life including faith-based women's organisations, market associations, and community women's groups should be recognised and supported as a primary vehicle for civic education, political mobilizations, and leadership development. Development practitioners should work through and alongside these existing institutions rather than creating parallel structures that risk displacing established networks of trust and legitimacy.

Fifth, legal and institutional frameworks for addressing harassment, violence, and social reprisals against women in politics require strengthening and effective enforcement. The fear of social sanction and physical insecurity constitutes a significant deterrent to women's political candidacy and public visibility, and no amount of civic empowerment will be sufficient to overcome this barrier without credible protection mechanisms at community, state, and federal levels.

7. Conclusion

This study has investigated the complex and contested ways in which Islamic religious discourse and patriarchal cultural norms shape women's political engagement in Northern Nigeria, with particular attention to participatory pathways beyond formal electoral candidacy. Through qualitative inquiry sixty in-depth interviews and twelve focus-group discussions conducted across the three states the study has demonstrated that religion and culture function as contingent forces whose enabling or constraining effects on women's political agency depend on interpretive leadership, doctrinal framing, material resources, social networks, and the specific forms of

participation under consideration. Women in Northern Nigeria are not politically passive; they participate in voter education, mobilizations, advocacy, and faith-based civic work in ways that are significant but systematically underrepresented in conventional measures of political participation.

The study's key theoretical contribution lies in its challenge to monolithic framings of religion and culture as static barriers to gender equality in African democratic contexts. By documenting the mechanisms through which Islamic values of justice, public welfare, and communal service are strategically invoked to legitimate women's civic roles, the study demonstrates that religious institutions contain interpretive resources for gender-inclusive governance that remain largely untapped in both scholarly analysis and policy design. Cultural norms similarly operate as dual structures, simultaneously restricting formal political leadership through patriarchal arrangements and enabling informal political agency through kinship and associational networks.

These findings have significant implications for democratic theory, gender studies, and development practice in sub-Saharan Africa. For democratic theory, they underscore the need for a broader conceptualization of political agency that accommodates the informal, relational, and religiously mediated forms through which women exercise civic influence in non-Western contexts. For development practice, they highlight the strategic importance of working with religious and community leaders, building on existing women's associational infrastructure, and integrating civic empowerment into education and economic development programmes. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how the enabling and constraining conditions identified in this study evolve in response to policy reforms, social movements, electoral cycles, and shifts in religious leadership—dynamics that cross-sectional qualitative inquiry cannot fully capture.

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