



Women's priorities for increased political participation in Rivers State

Summary

Across Nigeria, women are severely underrepresented at all levels of governance and face substantial social and economic barriers that hinder their active participation in politics. The situation in the Niger Delta is particularly difficult, due to highly competitive and violent aspects of politics and poor resource management by the government.

SDN's More Women in Governance project consulted women across 24 communities in Rivers State and 12 representatives of women-led civil society organisations (CSOs) on their priorities to support women's increased engagement in politics. These consultations identified four main barriers: a lack of economic means to participate in politics, negative public attitudes towards women's and young women's political participation, poor understanding of internal political party dynamics, and lack of support to prepare women to enter politics—and a set of corresponding recommendations detailed in this brief.

These findings reinforce the need for greater progress on implementing existing policies and international protocols that promote gender equality in politics in the Niger Delta and across Nigeria. Increasing women's and young women's participation in politics through an improvement in their political, social, and economic status is a crucial step towards achieving gender equality in Nigeria and in ensuring a more democratic, egalitarian, responsive, and inclusive political system.

Recommendations

- Reduce the financial barriers which prevent women entering politics:
 - Political parties can do this by providing free nomination forms and reducing other financial requirements for women.
 - Federal and State Government can do this by providing additional support to the Ministry of Women Affairs and the Ministry of Employment Generation and Empowerment to expand their economic empowerment programmes, especially in rural areas, to enable greater financial independence of women.
- Establish and increase programmes to build women's leadership skills and understanding of the political process:
 - Federal and State Government can provide further support to the Ministry of Women Affairs to scale-up its existing programme, including in rural areas.
 - Political parties should establish their own programmes to support existing female members to develop their leadership skills and understanding of the party political process.

- Introduce policies at the national and political party-level which encourage women to enter politics:
 - The Rivers State House of Assembly should pass the 35% affirmative action policy in to law.
 - Political parties should encourage their members to hold meetings during the day, and at locations which are convenient for all to attend.
- Authorities in government and political parties should be committed to implementing the 35% affirmative action. This will give women access to key decision-making roles, and also vie for elective positions.
- Political parties can increase public campaigns to promote positive messages about women in politics and to challenge negative stereotypes:
- Federal and State Government can support the National Orientation Agency to scale up voter education initiatives along these lines, including in rural areas.
- Civil society organisations and the media utilise their capacity and access to increase public debate on the same issues.



Cross section of participants of a consultation session on women's priorities in Gokhana LGA.

Introduction

At a national-level, women are severely underrepresented in politics; following the 2019 elections, the National Bureau of Statistics indicates men's representation is 93.6% across all levels of governance, while women have reached just 6.4%, and as citizens, women face greater challenges in ensuring their priorities are reflected in political decision-making compared to men. Whilst Nigeria has made a number of commitments towards achieving gender equality in politics, these commitments have been systemically undermined by poor implementation of gender friendly policies, primarily attributed to a lack of political will. For example, Nigeria is a signatory to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPA, 1995) which committed Nigeria to the equal participation of women in power and decision making. 11 years on since 2006, the federal government set a 35% national minimum quota of women representation at all levels of governance.

In the Niger Delta, these challenges are reinforced by the particularly violent nature of politics and competition over benefits from the region's oil and gas reserves. The Rivers State House of Assembly currently has only one woman as a member—indicative of the extent of the gender imbalance. Although, some effort has been made by the state government at the local government level, where the deputy chairpersons of the 23 Local Government Authorities (LGAs) are women, more needs to be done to facilitate a greater number of women enter influential political positions and to ensure the priorities and concerns of women are responded to by politicians.

As part of SDN's More Women in Governance project, we conducted a consultation in Rivers State to assess the barriers to active political participation and what government, political parties and other actors can do to improve the situation. The findings of these consultations are summarised in this briefing and we will be working with

women's groups to call on government and political parties to take action on these.

The consultations were done with women from 24 communities across six LGAs of the three senatorial zones in Rivers State and 12 representatives from women-led civil society organisations. The consultation was through focus group discussions and participants from a range of age groups—from 18 to 55 years. The focus group discussions (FGDs) were predominantly with women from rural communities whose needs are often not highlighted during urban discourse and, by extension, with gender focused CSOs in the urban area—Port-Harcourt.

Findings and priority areas to increase women's political participation:

The consultations highlighted four main challenges:

1. A lack of access to incomes, typically controlled by men in each household, and therefore, an inability to bear the costs associated with running for political office.
2. Poor understanding of political party dynamics and processes and lack of support to develop key skills, excluding them from some spheres of decision making gatherings.
3. Negative practices and attitudes within political parties, and poor implementation of gender friendly policies—such as the 35% affirmative action.
4. Negative public perception of women in politics and patriarchal norms in Nigerian society limit women and girls to caregiving roles rather than pursuing, or aspiring towards, a career in politics.

Another barrier which arose in consultations with CSO representatives but not community FGDs, was the poor security situation in Rivers state. It was felt that this was a general barrier to both men and women entering politics, but that women would greatly benefit from the improved situation.

Economic empowerment

90% of women and girls reported bearing a greater burden of unpaid household labour and said they were less likely to be engaged in waged labour than men, meaning they do not have their own income stream to invest in a political career. Furthermore, respondents told interviewers that men often control household finances—even if women and girls contribute to that via their own wage labour—meaning women and young women require the support of men in the household to invest in a political career. Women repeatedly expressed that the lack of economic means has hindered their active participation. According to one participant, “I am passionate about politics, and had contested for the position of a local government chairman; I didn’t win because I was not economically empowered to compete against my male counterparts who had more support from the party”. Another participant reported, “politics is not a game for the faint hearted, as a woman, you have to be financially and economically independent to succeed, otherwise the men will keep winning; I had contested and failed because of these reasons”.

“*...I didn’t win because I was not economically empowered to compete against my male counterparts who had more support from the party*”

Changing these gendered socio-economic norms is critical to lowering the financial barriers to women’s and young women’s participation in governance.

Political Parties and Inclusive Governance

Another common area highlighted by women was the way political parties work and how this excludes women. For example, women expressed dissatisfaction that lack of transparency during party elections for leadership positions, has excluded them from active participation and that in many instances, women only occupy the position of a ‘woman leader’. One participant confirms this, stating that “I have been playing politics for over 20 years, and I am yet to see women occupy decision-making positions in the party, other than the role of a woman leader, which in this instance cannot be occupied by the men, because it is meant for only women”. There is

also a tendency for men to arrange decisive decision-making meetings late at night, and in areas that are comparatively more precarious for women to be in, and are therefore excluded from the process to

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their disadvantage—women attending late night meetings also face accusations about their behaviour, further discouraging their involvement. The security of women should be an explicit and cross-cutting consideration when planning elections and scheduling meetings to be more practically inclusive. Women should be consulted throughout this ongoing process as experts on their own lived experience.

Building the confidence and skills of women and girls

Another area of concern reported by respondents was a lack of confidence and how that affected their active involvement in politics. Women’s and young women’s

capacity to participate more in governance is primarily constrained by entrenched patriarchal views and norms in their communities, for instance, that they should typically be a caregiver and domestic labourer within a household. According to one of the participants, “I am happy that we are having this FGD, you know; some of us have times in our lives where we feel quite confident that we can succeed in politics, while at other times we do not feel confident at all—because we contested and failed and we are being reminded that politics is always a game for the men—so this is the time to rebuild that lost confidence”. According to another participant, “as a woman leader, I have seen women go quiet during meetings because they are not as confident as the men to stand and speak for themselves even when they have to, and my question is can’t the party support women to advance their skills?”. These norms are internalised by women and girls, and result in a lack of support to build the necessary confidence, skills, and knowledge to engage, or aspire to a career, in politics.

Public attitudes

Negative perceptions and patriarchal norms in wider society that undermine women’s political aspirations need to be systematically exposed and challenged. For example, a few participants expressed dissatisfaction with how society seems to perceive men to be better candidates than women, thereby creating a barrier to women’s and young women’s equal participation in governance. It is, therefore, pertinent to continue sensitising the public on the need for equal participation in politics. Societies operate better when all members can participate equally in all aspects of social, economic, and political life.

(In)security

Gender-based violence and harassment against women and girls was repeatedly highlighted by CSOs during the consultation, although interestingly, this

did not come up in any of the FGDs held in communities. CSO representatives asserted that women felt comparatively less secure than men in certain political spaces, especially around election periods if they are voting or standing for election. Therefore, CSO representatives felt that prioritising security at all levels is key to women’s active involvement in the political processes.

Conclusion

Meaningful participation of women and young women in governance and decision-making is a fundamental human right. Women and young women have the right to enjoy the dividends of democracy, vote in elections, be elected and appointed to government offices, serve on boards, be empowered and employed, as well as making their voices heard in any process that will ultimately affect them, their families, and their communities. Nigeria has signed up to a number of commitments to work towards gender equality in politics but more needs to be done to implement these commitments.

Community-level consultations with women and with representatives from women-led CSOs in Rivers State highlighted the significant challenges that women still face in trying to enter politics. Respondents identified four major areas for government, political parties, and others to focus on to work towards Nigeria’s commitment to support more women to enter politics: lowering financial barriers, building women’s skills, improving the practices of political parties, and changing public attitudes. The recommendations here outline some initial, realistic steps that can be taken in relation to these challenges in Rivers state, but these are also likely to be relevant to wider Niger Delta states.



The More Women in Governance project aims to increase women's and girls' aspirations, and participation, in politics, governance, and decision making in Rivers State. The More Women in Governance project is funded by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) and implemented by SDN in partnership with the Nigeria Women Trust Fund (NWTF),





August 2019

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

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