



Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers to Women's Participation in Political Activities for Sustainable Community Development in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study discussed how socio-cultural economic barriers affect women's participation in political activities for sustainable community development in Rivers State. Socio-Cultural barriers to women's political participation in Rivers State include traditional beliefs about their domestic roles and male-dominated cultural value systems that relegate women to the background. Economic barriers stem from poverty and a lack of access to financial resources, leading to economic dependence on men. These factors result in low representation, limited leadership roles, and fear of political violence, hindering women from effectively participating in politics for sustainable community development. Outside these barriers, the women in Rivers State would play vital roles in community development through agriculture, entrepreneurship, leadership in community bodies, and civic engagement. However, their participation is significantly hindered by a complex interplay of socio-cultural and economic barriers. Addressing these issues through legislative reforms, affirmative action, and economic empowerment is crucial to increasing women's commitment to community goals and fostering development.

Keywords: Socio-Cultural, Economic Barrier, Participation, Community Development

Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental instrument for sustainable community development. No nation can attain meaningful growth and progress while neglecting education, particularly adult education, which plays a critical role in empowering individuals and enhancing societal welfare (Nwogu & Warriboke, 2015). Women's education is both a basic human right and a vital foundation for societal advancement. It encompasses the formal and informal learning of women and girls through schools, colleges, universities, vocational institutions, and other educational platforms. Educated women are better positioned to participate actively in political, social, and economic activities, thereby contributing significantly to national development through employment, entrepreneurship, leadership, and innovation. Moreover, women's education is widely regarded as a powerful catalyst for social transformation, economic growth, and national development. Beyond individual empowerment, educating women generates far-reaching benefits for families, communities, and society at large. An educated woman is more likely to make informed decisions, engage productively in economic activities, support community development initiatives, and promote the health, education, and well-being of future generations.

According to Mary Wollstonecraft (1972), women should receive the same quality and standard of education as men. She argued that without proper education, women remain restricted to superficial roles imposed by society rather than being guided by reason and intellectual development. "Despite global progress in expanding access to education, gender disparities in educational opportunities persist in many parts of the world, limiting women's potential and hindering sustainable development.

Historically, women's education was often neglected due to deeply rooted cultural beliefs and traditional gender roles that prioritized men's education over that of women. In many societies, women were expected to focus primarily on domestic responsibilities such as childcare, household management, and caregiving, while men were expected to take on public and economic roles. These societal expectations resulted in limited access to formal education for women and girls, reinforcing cycles of dependency, poverty, and inequality. Although attitudes toward women's education have evolved, remnants of these traditional norms continue to influence educational access and participation. Women's education plays a critical role in promoting gender equality and empowering women to participate fully in social, economic, and political life. Education equips women with knowledge, skills, and confidence, enabling them to challenge discrimination and assert their rights. Educated women are more likely to engage in decision-making processes within their households and communities, seek gainful employment, and assume leadership roles. As a result, women's education contributes significantly to reducing gender gaps and fostering inclusive development. Michelle (2016) stated that when girls are educated, their nations become stronger and more prosperous, linking girls' education directly to national development.

Socio-cultural barriers to women's political participation in Rivers State include restrictive cultural beliefs and the reproductive role ascribed to women, which confine them to domestic life and diminish their perceived political relevance (Etter & Obong, 2023). Economically, women face disadvantages due to poverty, lack of access to resources like capital for businesses, and economic dependence, hindering their ability to engage in political activities. These barriers limit women's political engagement, but increased participation is vital for inclusive and sustainable community development. In Rivers State, women are treated as Cinderellas in peace processes, decision-making, and active political participation, and have thus been shackled in diverse ways, but behind the pretext of being otherwise engaged with culturally attributed monthly roles. Additionally, social practices such as early marriage, limited access to education, gender-based discrimination, and lack of decision-making power further reinforce women's marginalization. Such barriers not only affect individual women but also hinder community development by preventing the full utilization of human potential. Understanding the effects of socio-cultural barriers on women's participation is therefore essential for developing effective policies and interventions to promote gender equality, empowerment, and inclusion.

Women's participation in economic, social, and political activities is essential for inclusive growth and sustainable development. Despite significant progress in gender equality initiatives, economic barriers continue to limit women's active participation across many societies. These barriers arise from unequal access to financial resources, limited employment opportunities, wage disparities, and restricted ownership of productive assets such as land and capital. As a result, many women remain economically dependent, thereby reducing their ability to fully engage in decision-making processes and public life. Amartya (1999). Globally, development discourse has evolved from viewing women merely as beneficiaries of development to recognizing them as active agents of change. Early development models largely ignored women's contributions, focusing primarily on men as household heads and economic actors. However, feminist scholars and development practitioners have emphasized that excluding women from development planning and decision-making processes undermines the effectiveness and sustainability of development initiatives. When women actively participate in community development, outcomes such as improved health, education, poverty reduction, and social cohesion are more likely to be achieved. Therefore, understanding women's participation in community development is not only a matter of gender equality but also a strategic approach to achieving broader development goals.

Women's participation in community development manifests in various forms, including involvement in local governance, participation in self-help groups, engagement in income-generating activities, leadership in community-based organizations, and contributions to social services such as education, healthcare, and environmental management. In many communities, women serve as caregivers, educators, and informal leaders, playing a central role in maintaining social stability and transmitting cultural values. Their close interaction with families and communities positions them uniquely to identify local needs and propose practical solutions. Nevertheless, despite these contributions, women often remain excluded from formal decision-making structures and leadership positions within their communities.

One of the key arguments for promoting women's participation in community development is its positive impact on social and economic outcomes. Research has shown that communities with higher levels of women's involvement tend to experience improved child welfare, better educational outcomes, enhanced health services, and more equitable

resource distribution. Women are more likely to prioritize issues such as clean water, sanitation, healthcare, education, and food security—areas that directly affect community well-being. As a result, their participation helps ensure that development initiatives are more responsive to the needs of all community members, particularly vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Women constitute a significant proportion of Rivers State's population and play critical roles in social cohesion, economic productivity, and community development. Despite their numerical strength and grassroots contributions, women's participation in political activities and decision-making processes in Rivers State remains notably low. This underrepresentation persists even though inclusive governance and gender equity are widely recognized as essential elements for sustainable community development.

Several socio-cultural factors, such as patriarchal norms, traditional gender roles, religious beliefs, and societal perceptions that view politics as a male-dominated arena, continue to limit women's political engagement. In many communities within Rivers State, women are discouraged from contesting political positions, participating in political meetings, or expressing political opinions, as such actions are often considered inconsistent with cultural expectations of femininity and domestic responsibility. In addition to socio-cultural constraints, economic barriers further restrict women's political participation. High levels of poverty, limited access to education, lack of financial resources, unemployment, and the high cost of political campaigns disproportionately affect women. These economic challenges reduce women's capacity to finance political activities, build political networks, and compete effectively with their male counterparts in electoral processes.

The persistent exclusion of women from political participation has implications for sustainable community development in Rivers State. Policies and development initiatives often fail to adequately reflect women's needs, priorities, and perspectives, leading to development outcomes that are neither inclusive nor sustainable. Despite national and international commitments to gender equality, such as Nigeria's National Gender Policy and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the gap between policy and practice remains evident. Given these challenges, there is a need for empirical investigation into the specific socio-cultural and economic barriers affecting women's participation in political activities in Rivers State, and how these barriers impact sustainable community development. Without such understanding, efforts to promote gender-inclusive governance and sustainable development may remain ineffective.

Concept of Community Education

Community development is widely recognized as a vital strategy for promoting sustainable social transformation. It is grounded in the belief that communities are not passive recipients of aid but active agents capable of shaping their own development trajectory. The concept integrates participation, empowerment, social justice, and collective action as central pillars of progress. The formal recognition of community development as a global development strategy emerged in the mid-twentieth century when the United Nations defined it as a process designed to create conditions of economic and social progress for the whole community through active participation and reliance on community initiatives (United Nations, 1952). Since then, the approach has evolved significantly, influenced by decentralization policies, participatory governance reforms, and grassroots activism. This paper presents a detailed examination of community development from theoretical, historical, and practical perspectives.

. Conceptual Foundations of Community Development

Community development refers to organized efforts aimed at improving the quality of life within a defined geographic or interest-based community. According to scholars, it encompasses both process and outcome dimensions. As a process, it emphasizes participation and empowerment; as an outcome, it seeks to improve living standards, enhance social cohesion, and strengthen institutions (Ife, 2016).

The World Bank later introduced the concept of Community-Driven Development (CDD), which transfers decision-making authority and resources directly to community groups (World Bank, 2004). This marked a shift from centralized planning to localized governance.

Elements of community development include:

- i I actively participate
- ii Capacity building
- iii Local leadership
- iv Social inclusion
- v Sustainable resource management

Historical Evolution

Community development originated from 19th-century social reform movements in Europe and North America. Early initiatives focused on poverty alleviation, cooperative societies, and adult education.

Post-World War II reconstruction efforts further institutionalized community development as part of national development planning. In developing countries, governments implemented rural development programs aimed at increasing agricultural productivity and improving infrastructure.

By the 1970s and 1980s, criticisms of top-down modernization theories led to the emergence of participatory development paradigms (Chambers, 1997). These approaches emphasized grassroots engagement and local knowledge systems.

In the 21st century, community development has become central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015.

Theoretical Frameworks

Community development draws upon multiple theoretical perspectives:

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment theory argues that individuals gain control over their lives by accessing resources, knowledge, and decision-making opportunities (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

Social Capital Theory

Social capital refers to networks, trust, and norms that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2000). Strong social capital enhances collective action.

Participatory Development Theory

Popularised by Robert Chambers, participatory development challenges hierarchical planning models and values local knowledge (Chambers, 1997).

Sustainable Development Theory

Sustainable development integrates economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection, ensuring intergenerational equity.

Principles of Community Development

Effective community development is guided by foundational principles:

- i Participation: Active involvement in planning and implementation.
 - ii Empowerment: Strengthening local capacity and decision-making power.
 - iii Equity: Ensuring inclusion of marginalized groups.
 - iv Self-Help: Promoting community initiative before external assistance.
 - v Sustainability: Long-term environmental and institutional viability.
 - vi Accountability: Transparent and responsible governance.
- These principles distinguish community development from purely welfare-based interventions.

Approaches to Community Development

Top-Down Approach

Government-led planning with limited local input.

Bottom-Up Approach

Community-initiated and managed development efforts.

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)

Focuses on existing strengths and capacities rather than deficiencies (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Community-Driven Development (CDD)

Promoted by the World Bank, emphasizing local control of funds and decision-making.

Stakeholders in Community Development

Community development involves collaboration among multiple actors:

- i Government: Policy formulation and funding.
 - ii NGOs: Capacity building and advocacy.
 - iii International Agencies: Financial and technical support.
 - iv Private Sector: Corporate social responsibility initiatives.
 - v Community Members: Primary decision-makers and beneficiaries.
- The synergy among these stakeholders enhances sustainability and impact.

Community Participation and Empowerment

Participation ensures ownership and accountability. Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation illustrates varying degrees of public involvement, from tokenism to citizen control.

Empowerment transforms communities from dependency to autonomy by improving skills, confidence, and leadership capacity.

Challenges in Community Development

Despite its advantages, community development faces challenges such as:

- i Limited financial resources
- ii Political interference
- iii Elite capture of benefits
- iv Weak institutional frameworks
- vi Cultural barriers
- vii Gender inequality

Addressing these challenges requires inclusive governance, transparency, and sustained capacity building.

Community Development and the Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations, emphasize community-level implementation. Goals such as poverty eradication, gender equality, quality education, and climate action require grassroots participation.

Community development operationalizes these global objectives at the local level, ensuring contextual relevance and sustainability.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) assess project effectiveness and impact. Participatory evaluation methods enhance transparency and local ownership. Indicators often include income levels, literacy rates, health outcomes, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability.

Contemporary Trends

- i Modern community development increasingly incorporates:
- ii Digital engagement platforms
- iii Climate resilience strategies
- iv Youth and gender-inclusive policies
- v Decentralized governance systems

Public-private partnerships

Global institutions such as the World Bank continue to support community-driven initiatives worldwide.

Various Ways Men Intimidate Women from Participating in Political, Social, and Economic Activities That Hinder Women from Contributing to Community Development

Gender equality remains a cornerstone of sustainable community development, yet in many societies, women continue to face systemic barriers that limit their participation in political, social, and economic activities. One of the most pervasive barriers is the intimidation and marginalization of women by men, which manifests in both overt and subtle ways. From political arenas where women are often discouraged or threatened from contesting for leadership positions, to social settings where cultural norms and peer pressures limit women's voices, to economic spaces where unequal access to resources and discriminatory practices persist, men's actions can significantly hinder women's empowerment and community contributions. Kabira & Nzioki (1995), noted how socio-cultural narratives frame women as untrustworthy, disagreeable, or less capable, contributing to negative stereotyping and male resistance toward women's public engagement.

Intimidation can take many forms, including psychological harassment, verbal abuse, social ostracism, and even physical threats. Politically, women may face ridicule, character attacks, or systemic exclusion from decision-making processes. Socially, traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms often pressure women to prioritize domestic responsibilities over community engagement, limiting their social influence. Economically, women encounter barriers such as unequal pay, denial of credit, limited training opportunities, and workplace harassment, which restrict their ability to participate fully in wealth creation and economic planning. Banerjee (2011) said that female politicians face gender stigma and undermining behavior from male colleagues, which discourages women from pursuing or maintaining leadership roles. These challenges are not merely individual obstacles but have profound implications for community development. When women are sidelined, communities lose diverse perspectives, innovative solutions, and inclusive governance, which are essential for sustainable growth. Understanding the ways in which men intimidate

women, consciously or unconsciously, is therefore critical to designing interventions that promote equality and empower women to contribute fully to the development of their communities.

This paper explores the various ways men intimidate women across political, social, and economic spheres and examines the consequences of such intimidation for community development. By identifying these barriers, the study aims to lay the foundation for policies, strategies, and cultural shifts that create safer, more inclusive environments where women's contributions are recognized and valued.

Socio-Cultural Barriers Affecting Women's Participation in Politics

Women's participation in politics is widely recognized as a critical element of inclusive democratic governance and sustainable development. Political engagement by women helps ensure that public policies reflect the interests of all citizens and that diverse voices shape decision-making processes. Yet, in Rivers State, Nigeria, women remain significantly under-represented in political offices and leadership positions at all levels of government. Despite making up roughly half of the population, cultural and social norms, deeply entrenched patriarchal values, and community expectations continue to place constraints on women's access to political power. These socio-cultural barriers not only marginalize women politically but also limit the overall socio-economic development potential of communities across the state.¹ G. A. Nwogu & B. O. N. Wariboko (2015) note that women in Rivers State face barriers, including economic disadvantage and fear (phobia) of political vices, which discourage them from participating at the grassroots level. These barriers are tied to community and cultural perceptions that undervalue women in politics.

Rivers State, located in the Niger Delta region of southern Nigeria, exhibits political dynamics similar to those in other parts of the country but with some unique local manifestations. Research shows that women contesting elections in Rivers State face structural challenges, including negative societal attitudes toward female leadership, the perception that politics is a male domain, and limited family or community support for women's political ambitions. In many communities, traditional gender norms emphasize that a woman's primary role is within the domestic sphere, responsible for household duties and caregiving, rather than in public life. This belief system significantly influences public opinion and voter behavior, hindering women's visibility and effectiveness as political actors.

Furthermore, socio-cultural constructs shaped by customs, religion, and historical practices often associate political authority with masculinity. In Rivers State, as in many parts of Nigeria, leadership and decision-making have traditionally been considered the preserve of men, which creates a societal expectation that women should defer to male counterparts in political matters. Women who seek political office may therefore face social stigma, ridicule, or discouragement, forcing them to choose between conforming to established norms and pursuing political careers.

Another dimension of socio-cultural barriers in Rivers State relates to patriarchal family structures and community expectations. Many women depend on male family members—husbands, fathers, and brothers—for financial and social support. These relationships can limit women's autonomy and decision-making capacity, especially when family elder meetings. In extreme cases, women are expected to obtain permission from their male relatives before participating in political forums or campaigns, restricting their ability to organize effectively and build constituencies. Linked to these constraints is the lack of positive role models and mentors for women in politics within the state. Historically, there have been very few women in top political positions in Rivers State — such as gubernatorial seats or powerful legislative roles — which perpetuates the perception that political leadership is beyond the reach of women. The absence of female political role models contributes to a cycle in which young women and girls lack confidence and aspirational examples to guide their political ambitions.

In many local communities, traditional and religious practices also shape gendered expectations around public roles. Although Rivers State is ethnically and culturally diverse, many communities uphold values that restrict women's voices in public decision-making and discourage them from contesting in elections or holding influential positions within political parties. These norms can manifest through rituals, community governance structures, or social sanctions against women who step outside prescribed roles. As a result, many women self-censor or avoid political engagement altogether to avoid community backlash.

Socio-cultural barriers in Rivers State also intersect with issues such as gender inequality in education and economic access. Women from rural areas or economically disadvantaged backgrounds often have lower educational attainment, which can limit their understanding of political processes or reduce their confidence to participate in governance. Although these are not purely cultural issues, cultural expectations about women's roles in home and work life contribute to educational and economic disparities that ultimately affect political participation.

The consequences of the underrepresentation of women in politics are profound for Rivers State. When women are absent from decision-making roles, policies often fail to reflect the lived experiences and needs of half the population,

particularly on issues such as maternal health, education, gender-based violence, and community welfare. Moreover, the exclusion of women from leadership roles diminishes the potential for inclusive governance and sustainable community development, as diverse perspectives are essential in crafting equitable policies. Ogbonna's (2009) study identifies political violence and male dominance as structural barriers that effectively intimidate women from contesting or participating fully in politics.

Strategies to Address Sociocultural and Economic Barriers

Apart from education, there are specific strategies to address the socio-cultural and economic barriers limiting women's participation in political activities for sustainable community development in Rivers State, such as adult literacy, civic and voter education, economic empowerment and financial support, legal and policy reforms, gender quotas and affirmative action, socio-cultural norms, awareness, role models, and community engagement. (Wami, Kobani, and Victor, 2023). Below are content-specific, well-supported strategies designed to address the socio-cultural and economic barriers that hinder women's participation in political activities, with the aim of promoting sustainable community development in Rivers State.

1. **Adult Literacy, Civic and Voter Education:** A study in Rivers State shows that adult literacy, civic education, and voter education significantly enhance women's participation in grassroots politics. By equipping women with knowledge and skills, these educational initiatives help them perform more effectively in political roles (Nwogu & Iheanyi, 2015). Sustained awareness campaigns also inform women of political processes and encourage participation. Expand accessible adult education programs, particularly in rural areas, integrating political literacy into broader empowerment curricula.
2. **Reduce Economic Barriers Via Empowerment and Financial Support:** Financial constraints are a major obstacle. Women often cannot afford campaign costs, nomination forms, or lack of collateral for loans.

Ways to enable women to participate fully in the economy include:

- (i) To provide small loans to low-income women to start to grow business.
 - (ii) Entrepreneurship training
 - (iii) Scholarship for women who are willing to improve their education.
 - (iv) Allow women to work.
3. **Legal and Policy Reform:** Advocates should urge the Rivers State House of Assembly to enact 40% affirmative action policy to guarantee female representation in governance. Broader policy recommendations include:
 - i. Implementing gender quotas within political parties and elected bodies.
 - ii. Enforcing existing national gender policies to frame more inclusive governance.
 - iii. Lobby for legal adoption of gender quotas and launch oversight mechanisms to ensure enforcement.
4. **Socio-Cultural Norms:** Socio-cultural norms influence how people behave, what roles they take, and how they access opportunity. When these norms create barriers, such as restricting women's access to formal education, limiting their participation in politics, and stigmatizing certain women from participating in community development.

Women can be encouraged through a host of dialogue sessions with elders, religious leaders, and community influencers to challenge restrictive norms in respectful ways, and also use community theater, storytelling, and radio programs to reshape narratives about women's roles.
5. **Political Party Reforms and Internal Support Structures:** Women often face hidden party barriers, such as step-down or zone-out tactics that block their path to candidacy. Internal party support is weak, lacking mentorship, funding, and training. Push parties to set up internal mentorship and leadership development programs, and gender-inclusive campaign financing structures.
6. **Secure political Spaces (Safety and Protection):** Political environments can be hostile, with threats, intimidation, and gendered violence discouraging women from participation (Nwaorgu & Ifeanyi, 2023). Reforms are needed to strengthen legal frameworks that protect women in political spaces and ensure safe participation. Establish state-level protection mechanisms, including hotlines and rapid-response teams to address political harassment or violence.
7. **ICT Access and Digital Inclusion:**
 - (i) Women's access to digital platforms is often limited due to socio-economic and policy gaps

- (ii) Expanding ICT access helps women engage with political information, mobilize support, and connect with networks.
- (iii) Launch digital literacy programs, provide community internet hubs, and promote online civic engagement tools targeting women.

Ways of encouraging women to participate politically, socially, and economically in community development

Encouraging women to participate politically, socially, and economically in community development requires a multi-faceted approach. It involves changing attitudes, removing barriers, creating opportunities, and building support systems. Here's a breakdown of practical and impactful ways to foster women's involvement in all three spheres:

1. Political Participation

Encourage women to engage in decision-making and leadership roles:

a. Education & Awareness

Conduct civic education programs targeting women to increase their understanding of political systems and their rights.

Promote awareness campaigns about the importance of women in governance and leadership.

b. Leadership Training

Offer leadership development programs focused on public speaking, policy development, and campaign management.

Provide mentorship from experienced female political leaders.

c. Quotas & Affirmative Action

Advocate for gender quotas in local councils, political parties, and government bodies.

Ensure legal frameworks support equal participation.

d. Supportive Networks

Establish women's political networks and forums to share ideas and support campaigns.

Encourage male allies and community leaders to support women in politics.

2. Social Participation

Empower women to actively contribute to social life and community development:

a. Community Groups & Organizations

Create or support women's groups, cooperatives, and NGOs that allow women to voice concerns and lead initiatives.

Include women in community decision-making bodies (e.g., school boards, village councils).

b. Gender Sensitization Programs

Conduct workshops to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

Educate communities on the benefits of inclusive participation.

c. Role Models & Storytelling

Highlight the success stories of women making a difference in their communities.

Promote media representation of empowered women in society.

d. Safe Spaces

Provide physical and psychological safe spaces where women can meet, organize, and lead discussions without fear or intimidation.

3. Economic Participation

Support women's access to resources, opportunities, and markets:

a. Skills Training & Education

Offer vocational and business training tailored to local economic opportunities.

Encourage STEM and digital literacy for girls and women.

b. Access to Finance

Facilitate access to microcredit, savings groups, and financial literacy programs.

Encourage banks and institutions to design women-friendly financial products.

c. Entrepreneurship Support

Support women-owned small businesses with grants, mentorship, and market access.

Provide platforms (e.g., markets, fairs) to showcase and sell women's products.

d. Workplace Equality

Advocate for fair wages, maternity leave, and anti-harassment policies.

Promote equal opportunities for employment and promotion.

4. **Cross-Cutting Strategies**

These apply across political, social, and economic sectors:

a. **Education for Girls**

Ensure girls complete secondary and higher education to build a foundation for active participation in all spheres.

b. **Legal Reforms**

Push for laws that protect women's rights to own land, work, vote, and speak freely.

c. **Male Engagement**

Engage men and boys as allies in promoting gender equality and challenging harmful cultural norms.

d. **Use of Technology**

Leverage social media and digital platforms to inform, mobilize, and connect women across regions.

Empirical evidence in Rivers State highlights these barriers:

In rural community organizations, only 30% of leadership roles are held by women; the main obstacles include gender bias and traditional beliefs favoring male leadership. (Okafor 1987:23). In government rural development programs, women face socio-economic limitations, lack of resources, insufficient leadership inclusion, political hurdles, health challenges, program design issues, and security concerns.

In Obio/Akpor L.G.A., women leaders who can delegate and maintain accountability effectively and positively impact sustainable development require greater social, economic, and political empowerment to expand their roles.

Historical and public sector highlights: Rivers State has seen notable female office holders at the state level:

1. Ipalibo Banigo served as Deputy Governor (2015-2023) and was then elected to the Senate.
2. Ngozi Nma Odu was elected Deputy Governor in 2023.

Other women have served in judicial, executive, and legislative roles, e.g Chief Judges, Commissioners and prominent legislators like Betty Apiafi, who holds both House and Senate positions.

These high-profile positions show progress at the state level. Yet, the grassroots level still struggles with lower representation and structural barriers.

Research highlights from Rivers State Communities

1. Gokana and Khana LGAs: A 2023 study found that basic literacy, family life education, and civic education greatly enhance community development in Gokana and Khana. The authors recommended that local governments establish literacy programs across all LGAs to boost women's contributions. (Dokubo & Gborobie, 2023)
2. Omuma LGA: This 2020 study reported that adult education, particularly basic literacy, functional literacy, and skill acquisition programs, empowered women, enabling them to participate more meaningfully in community development. (Kobani & Nwanorue, 2020)
3. Obio-Akpor LGA: Research here concluded that women leaders who are decisive, accountable, and delegative positively impact sustainable community development. Recommendations include implementing policies that empower women politically, socially, and economically. (Okere, 2020)
4. Ikwerre LGA (Organizations): Women's organizations in Ikwerre actively participate in community development. This study advocated for government support, such as matching grants, to amplify their impact. (Aduwari & Okwakpam, 2018)
5. Emohua LGA: Women's socio-economic contributions were evident in the provision of soft agricultural loans and vocational skills training, which significantly enhanced local socio-economic development. (Nkem & Onyeozu, 2023)

Government Agencies and NGOs Supporting Women's Education.

- i. Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs: This ministry, headquartered in Port-Harcourt, advises on gender policies and implements initiatives like skills acquisition centers and Women Development Centers for Vocational training. It promotes informal and mass literacy.

- ii. Rivers State Sustainable Development Agency (RSSDA): While not exclusively focused on women, RSSDA is tasked with eradicating poverty, developing rural areas, and empowering youth, goals that align with improving women's educational outcomes.
- iii. Judith Amaechi's Empowering Support Initiative (NGO): Launched in 2008, this NGO provides practical support and training for disadvantaged women and children in the state. It has also sponsored ICT training programs for youth

Comprehensive overview of women's participation in grassroots politics in Rivers State, based on recent developments.

1. **Structural Representation at Local Levels:** A study by Stakeholders Democracy Network (SDN) found that across houses of assembly and national legislative seats in the Niger Delta – including Rivers State – women held just 7% visible roles that could encourage more engagement (Nkebari & Nyenke, 2005).
2. **Affirmative Action and Gender Policies:** In 2024, the Rivers State government, in partnership with NGOs like SDN, ALIVE, and GADA, drafted a five- year gender policy (2004-2028) aimed at promoting governance inclusion, economic empowerment, and protection from violence for women and girls. The WTED pilot programme has already started, training 30 young women in leadership and political participation. (Okpo 2024)
Advocacy efforts by the League of Women Voters recognized increased inclusion during the 2024 local government council election; women ran as chairpersons and deputies across councils, signaling progress toward the 35% affirmative action goal set by Nigeria's National Gender Policy.
3. **Barriers to Effective Grassroots Participation:** A study focused on Ahoada West LGA highlighted persistent challenges such as denial of land inheritance, widowhood practices, physical harassment, educational disadvantages, and deeply embedded cultural norms limiting women's political empowerment. In Gokana LGA, only about 30% of leadership roles in community-based organizations were held by women. Major constraints included gender bias, the belief that women can't lead men, and the perception that men are better leaders. (Ikuru & Asor, 2008)."

Conclusion

Women in Rivers State face substantial socio-cultural and economic barriers that limit their participation in political activities, thereby undermining sustainable community development. These barriers include gender inequality, patriarchal norms, discriminatory cultural practices, lack of economic empowerment, low access to education, and political violence or intimidation. Because of these constraints, women are under-represented in elective and appointive positions, especially at community and grassroots levels. Their exclusion from decision-making undermines the inclusivity and responsiveness of governance and peace processes, and policies and programs often fail to address women's needs or perspectives. Sustainable development suffers because community development depends on broad participation, and women's input could drive better outcomes in education, health, social welfare, conflict resolution, rural development, etc, but many of those potential gains remain unrealized. For sustainable community development in Rivers State, women's participation in politics isn't just about equity, its pragmatic, inclusive governance that leads to more balanced priorities (health, education, welfare), more peaceable communities (since women often play key roles in conflict resolution and social cohesion), and more effective use of resources. Women can bring different perspectives and priorities to resource allocation. Without removing the socio-cultural and economic barriers, development and outcomes are likely to be less sustainable, less equitable, and less representative of the needs of the whole population.

Recommendations

4. Reorientation of traditional beliefs and stereotypes by community leaders and institutions. Provision of basic literacy, family life, and civic education programs, particularly through grassroots and local government efforts. Ensuring women's access to productive resources like land, credit, vocational training, and skill-acquisition opportunities.
5. The politicizing development efforts, forming women-centric groups, and creating economic empowerment via cooperatives and collective mechanisms.
6. Expanding women's leadership programs and political support, including affirmative action policies and reduced financial burdens in political participation.
7. Grassroots sensitization and inclusive program design with women integrated across planning, implementation, and monitoring of development projects.

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