GENDER POLITICS IN NIGERIA: A SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON FEMINISM, FEMINIST POLITICS, AND DEMOCRACY

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Abstract: Nigeria's democracy exhibits gender-based inequalities that suppress women's voices and disproportionately under-represent them in political leadership. Using feminist political philosophy as its theoretical framework, and mixed methods to gather data, this study interrogated Nigerian feminism, feminist politics, and democracy through the lens of 100 working-class women. Findings reveal the existential struggles of participants whose material deprivation and political powerlessness have increased apathy towards gender politics, elections, and political institutions. Wedged between modernity and patriarchy, they reject Western notions of sexual liberalism and conceptualize democracy as necessary but incapable of ensuring economic progress – the end for which it exists. The arguments in the present article matter because they contribute to feminist/political scholarship in Nigeria.

Keywords: *feminism, Nigerian women, gender inequality, under-representation of women, African feminism*

Introduction

Twenty-five years after democratization, women remain marginalized and under-represented in political leadership positions in Nigeria. Despite international efforts to increase their engagement with and participation in electoral politics as a fundamental human right, a cornerstone of modern democracy, and a step towards political diversity and inclusion that benefits women, governance, and society, Nigerian women are largely excluded from

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mainstream political leadership (Shreeves and Boland 2021). Although participation is constitutionally guaranteed through universal adult suffrage enshrined in the 1979 and 1999 constitutions, and ratified in *the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa* (the Maputo Protocol), in practice, women's presence in and representation at decision-making level is not only marginal but also inadequate. Women are significantly outnumbered by men in political offices at national, state and local government spaces, although they constitute about half the polling population of over 90 million registered voters (INEC 2023). The few women in political offices are mostly special appointees to oversee ministries of women affairs and/or social development.

Sadie (2020) argues that slow progress in increasing women's inclusion in political leadership is an enduring pattern in Nigeria. This disproportionate under-representation has a long history and continues to linger even after democratization in 1999. That year, at the Federal House of Representatives, only 12 of the elected 360 parliamentarians were women; 17 in 2003; 25 in 2007; 24 in 2011; 20 in 2015; 11 in 2019; and only 14 in 2023 (IPU 2024). Women's representation at the Senate is equally low. In 1999 and 2003, only three of the 109 elected senators were women. The number increased to nine in 2011, decreased to seven in 2015, rose again to 11 in 2019, and 4 in 2023 (IPU 2024). Currently, in both houses of parliament, there are only 18 female parliamentarians (5.2%) out of 469 lawmakers (INEC 2023). The picture is equally bleak in state houses of assemblies. Therefore, Nigeria is ranked 125 out of 146 nations on the global league table of women in parliament (WEF 2024). This is in stark contrast to some African nations (Liberia, Gabon, Malawi, Mauritius, and Tanzania) where women have served as presidents and in other top political positions (Nkereuwem 2023).

The existing literature on women's political marginalization has focused significantly on patriarchy as the main barrier to inclusion (Kelly 2019; Oluyemi 2015; Dosekun 2020). Agunbiade (2020) traced its modern history to 1922 when elective representation was first introduced in Lagos and Calabar. Nigerian men, acting on the colonial government's directive, used the newly formed Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), led by Herbert Macaulay, to establish their growing influence in the Lagos Council. This gave men a 70-year head start before the first woman was elected into parliament in 1979. Vaughan and Banu (2014) argued that Nigeria's social, sexist, and patronage-based culture with deep-rooted economic and household inequalities restrains women from achieving their political potential. These inequalities transcend the domestic sphere and manifest in

the political and corporate suppression of women. Awofeso and Odeyemi (2014) linked patriarchy and culture, stating that cultural and social values with strong religious undertones, more than anything else, have been used by men to control the political system to the extent that many women are excluded from political decision-making. They note further that socio-biological dissimilarities between men and women are responsible for the sexual division of labour, which posits that women are not only biologically and naturally inferior but also subordinate to men.

Onah and Nwall (2018) found that class plays a role too. Women often lack the financial, social, and material resources they need to run for office. The cost of picking up a nomination form, campaigning for election, sustaining media presence, and mobilizing grass-roots support is substantial and often beyond the reach of most women. Women face discrimination, exclusion, and antagonism within most mainstream political parties (Kishi 2022). Over a decade ago, Achebe (2011) asserted that female politicians suffer substantial discrimination, sexism, and opposition despite the Federal Character Principle that stipulates otherwise. Dosekun (2019) found that minimal representation of women in top political offices across Nigeria is not natural and fair, but an ideological condition shaped by patriarchy and preserved by culture and tradition. Dosekun added that an amalgam of financial, educational, and structural obstacles holds women back, especially in the political arena; not because women lack ability or potential but because they are victimized through economic deprivation, domination, and unequal social relations. Tremblay (2007) linked the connection between women, politics, and economic subjugation noting that these are mutually related, intersectional, and interdependent. Despite the government's efforts, including criminalizing discrimination and ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1985, women in Nigeria remain scanty in top political positions (Orji, Orji and Agbanyim 2018).

To date, studies that investigate what working-class, low-income women want from politics, what they think about feminism, and their understanding of the role of women in political leadership in Nigeria are limited. Voices of everyday women (with modest income) on politics remain muffled, unheard, and marginalized. This study presents an analysis of debates, issues, and perspectives on feminism, feminist politics, and Nigeria's democracy from the lens of working-class women. It sets out a multi-layered exploration of their lived experiences, internalized norms, the extent of their engagement with or detachment from feminist politics, if and how they challenge the

status quo, the future of democratic politics, and how women plan to function within it as they negotiate patriarchy, tradition, and modernity. These questions, tackled in the present mini-perception study, are important in three fundamental ways: firstly, Nigeria's democracy (the largest on the continent) is at a critical juncture. Although it is consolidating, evidenced by periodic elections and the non-violent transfer of power, Nigeria's democracy still exhibits significant gender-based deficits, social inequality, and state inefficiency. Secondly, with increasing access to higher education, the labour market, and social media (Nasidi, Babale and Muhammad 2020; Aladi and Okoro 2021), women in general and working-class women are significant players with the potential to shape Nigeria's next general election as they become more visible, viable, and vocal. Finally, with an increasing focus on degenderized knowledge production, working-class women are no longer mere bystanders or passive observers, and their contributions could expand the frontiers of new knowledge.

Therefore, this study allowed a wide array of low-income women to take the driving seat in expressing their political views and experiences, and in the process, suggesting alternative interpretations, and personal insight into issues that both affect them and their world. The present article offers an empirically based, data-driven analysis of everyday women in an African context. Findings and recommendations from this study will offer new perspectives, bottom-up ideas, and fresh suggestions specific to Nigeria and applicable across the sub-region. It contributes to the growing literature on gender and politics in Nigeria. Before presenting data and analysis on Nigerian women, we begin our discussion by contextualizing this study within the wider gender-democracy theoretical framework.

Feminist Political Theory: An Overview

Feminism is an umbrella word that embodies beliefs, efforts, and actions geared toward social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Day (2016: 16) conceptualized it as "an interdisciplinary approach to issues of equality and equity based on gender, gender expression, gender identity, sex, and sexuality as understood through social theories and political activism." Feminism aims to integrate and address issues of gender inequality that intersect with class, race, economics, and politics. Hook (2000) defined it as a movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation, and oppression. Feminist political theory, an offshoot of feminism, is an intellectual political theory that surveys politics with an emphasis on women and their historical,

contemporary, and ongoing inequality with men in the political arena (Bryson 2003). As a branch of political philosophy, feminist political theory explores and develops new practices, processes, and justifications on how politics should be organized and/or reorganized (McAfee, Noëlle and Howard 2018). It works to fight injustice and socio-political inequality experienced by women through critiquing and transforming systems, institutions, and theories (Tucker 2014). While feminism broadly encapsulates movements that seek to establish equality of the sexes and aims to secure equal rights and opportunities for women within the liberal democratic framework because women are born equal with inalienable human rights, feminist political theory focuses on political philosophy, its gender-centric re-evaluation, and the pursuit of gender political equality (Tong 2009). Feminist political theory consolidated in the 1960s and 1970s within the larger context of women's liberation. Before that period, the intersectionality of politics and gender with its relations in society, including women's political rights, existed only in the margins. Unlike feminism, which is a belief and movement that advocates for social, educational, economic, and domestic equity, feminist political theory focuses on women's political equality with men within existing mainstream political structures (Bryson 2003).

African feminism and its political strand share certain universal elements peculiar to the struggles of women globally. Firstly, it aligns with radical feminism, which asserts that women, who form the bulk of wage labourers, are predominantly uneducated or undereducated, culturally subjugated, economically suppressed, and unfairly treated. Therefore, they lack the means of production and are doomed to discrimination, misrepresentation, and oppression (Thompson 2001). Secondly, African feminism also interrogates the comparable cultural oppression of women in societies. It rejects the social construct that locates women as "weaker vessels" and calls for disrupting male superiority in the political arena. The belief is that centuries of male suppression can practically be restructured (Dosekun 2019). Finally, it shares the political reality of women's under-representation in the arena of politics and policy; and seeks redress. However, African feminism has its unique peculiarities. Although it is like Black feminism – the study of the intersectional oppression of Black women in the United States of America and Europe with race at its core and politics at its fringe – African feminism is different (Atanga 2013). It addresses issues that transcend the experiences of black women outside Africa to include matters such as the failure of hierarchical society, multiparty elections, economic instability ravaging communities, patriarchy, political exclusion, family

politics, generational poverty, and religious fundamentalism (Ogunyemi 1985). According to Atanga, it aims to distinguish African women's political struggles, particularly their histories, present realities, and current activism, from global, Western struggles.

African feminism and its political offshoot encapsulate different strands with regional distinctions due to divergent political and socio-cultural realities within the continent (Amaefula 2021). These peculiarities shape and are shaped by women's lived experiences in different ways. For example, North Africa's religious and cultural civilization is radically different from that of Southern Africa. West Africa is also dissimilar to the Horn of Africa (Goredema 2016). Regional cleavages also shape postmodernist feminism across the continent (Roger 2007). While some question the notion of traditional social norms, gender-assigned roles, and the concept of universal grand narratives such as traditional family structures, others reject it as un-African and Western-centric. Other strands of African feminism, noted Nkealah (2016), include African womanism that focuses on the lived experiences of black women in Africa as they navigate colonialism, patriarchy, class and culture. Stiwanism focuses on institutional structures that arrest the development of African women. Nego-feminism, femalism and cultural feminism are also strands of African feminism. This divergence captures a deep concern with power relations, a critique of traditional notions of family, of the history of political philosophy, of theoretical exclusions from mainstream political thought, and of an openness to debate social identities (Tucker 2011). Our article unpacks the uniqueness of Nigeria's feminism and politics from the perspective of low-income women.

Overview of Gender and Politics in Nigeria

Political analysis through the lens of feminist politics in Nigeria is evolving and expanding. This review begins with a critique of two simplistic assertions; thereafter, a more nuanced explanation will follow. First, we contest the claim that pre-colonial politics was open and inclusive; that across several kingdoms and city-states, women served in different political capacities as crowned chiefs, military leaders, and political advisers (Kolawale, Adeigbe, Adebayo and Abubakar 2013). While we admit that Queen Amina of Zaria, Iyalode of Egbaland, Moremi of Ife and Iyalode of Ibadan were outstanding freedom fighters in pre-colonial Nigeria (Abdul et al. 2011), no evidence of substantial proportion supports the claim that women were regarded equal with men or occupied equal political and social status. A handful

of women leaders, according to Achebe (2011), shaped local politics in Dahomey (present-day Republic of Benin), these narratives are overstated claims of a woman's place in West Africa's political history. We argue that pre-colonial political culture was historically male-centric, hierarchical, and steep in tradition. Secondly, we question Okoye's (2002) assertion that European patriarchy institutionalized male dominance in colonial Nigeria due to Victorian and Christian ideology in England. This suggests that traditional political institutions in Nigeria were not patriarchal; and that male dominance was a new policy instituted by the imperial government to deliberately relegate and marginalize women. We argue that patriarchy, not coloniality, is a cross-cultural, universal ideology that permeated Western, Eastern, and African cultures. Although colonial authorities had visible male-centric elements, historical, economic, and administrative realities played a more visible role.

In her review of Marjorie McIntosh's work, entitled *Yoruba Women, Work and Social Change* (2009), that traced the history of women in Yorubaland (Western Nigeria) from 1820 to 1960, Amoah (2009) argued that a central theme in Yorubaland is that men are viewed as strong, rational, economic providers, whereas women are portrayed as weak and emotive with the primary responsibility as wives and homemakers. While women took part in petty trading, their domestic duties took precedence over any form of social role. Amoah further noted that a woman's ability to have authority in politics was rare. Women's participation in politics has always been constrained by religious beliefs, cultural practices, and family commitments (Egbucha 2006; Ikime 1980; Vaughan and Banu 2014). Women's choices or recommendations did not expressly influence political and social policies (Enemuo 1999). In rare cases, however, women joined forces to challenge or shape policy as in the case of the Aba Women's Riot in 1929 and during the Abeokuta Women's Revolt in 1947 (Ikime 1980). In Northern Nigeria, Vaughan and Banu (2014) found the nexus of Islamic culture, political centralization of power, the influence of Islamic clerics, and resistance to Christianity/Westernization as obstacles against Hausa/Fulani women in the North. In the East, culture, and tradition –rooted in the belief that women are not equal but subordinate to men – barred women from political leadership and inheritance rights under Igbo customary law (Otite and Ogionwo 2006). Similar barriers, rooted in the use of culture and religion, remain visible across Nigeria (Oluyemi 2015).

A more nuanced explanation combines political economy, religion, and patriarchy into a system of exclusion that has endured to date. In *The*

Role of Nigerian Women, Falola (2015) contextualized women within the emerging political economy of legitimate trade in the nineteenth century. He argued that changes brought about by trade and diplomacy with Europe altered gender relations, pushing women further into the political margins. As the economy shifted from the slave trade towards cash crop production, Nigerian men and European firms dominated the production and distribution of commodities. When elective representation was introduced in colonial Nigeria through the 1922 Clifford Constitution, women were not considered politically equal with men and were consequently barred from voting and running for office (Agunbiade 2020). It was not until 1954 in the Western and Eastern regions, and much later in 1979 in the North, that women became enfranchised. Women's voting rights were more focused on voting for men and not geared toward equality and inclusion. Women were empowered to vote but not to compete with men. Political parties from the start and to date are not only male-centric but have only male leaders and executive members. Women's participation is at best marginalized, downplayed, and undervalued (Ejukonemu 2018).

In the immediate post-independence era, men's dominance extended and consolidated not only in the three arms of government but also in banking, industry, civil service, and education. The exclusion of girls from higher education barred women from many of the new occupations introduced during and after colonial rule. In many parts of Nigeria, educating the girl child was considered unnecessary because, after marriage, the economic returns of an educated woman accrue to her husband and new family (Falola 2005). A religious dogma on women's submissiveness was used by "clergymen" to discourage women from vying for political leadership. Although there were exceptions to the rule in the South, where higher levels of political participation, voting rights, and access to education by women were apparent, nationally, the overall picture was bleak (Orji, Orji and Agbanyim 2018). All through the political imbroglio of post-independence, starting with the first coup in 1966 that led to the Nigeria/ Biafra Civil War (1967-1970) and prolonged military rule after that, women were not allowed to occupy any political post. By 1979, when constitutional politics took off (Second Republic), women were also side-lined. After four short years, the military returned to power in 1984 and continued the exclusion of women in politics. In 1999, Nigeria democratized but the pattern endured. More than ever, financial constraints have become the biggest inhibitor (Ette and Akpan-Obong 2022). Additionally, the hassles of electioneering – a time-consuming undertaking that demands extensive travelling, late-night

meetings, and unscheduled arrangements – were disincentives to women (Dosekun 2019). Furthermore, political parties repeatedly denied women platforms to compete during elections. Within political parties, female candidates were viewed as less qualified and less likely to win or be elected.

In sum, the existing literature indicates that women are still perceived as "weaker" and "inferior" (Ejukonemu 2018), denied equal opportunities, and are subordinated, marginalized, and politically oppressed despite the significant work that women's rights groups have done in the last two decades. The following contribution interrogated low-income women's worldview on under-representation, feminist politics, and democracy.

Methodology

The study's methodological approach combines qualitative and quantitative traditions. Semi-structured interviews (SSI) and surveys were used to gather data. Both methods allowed participants to share their experiential knowledge on complex political issues, enabled them to interpret feminism, provided an overview of participants feedback, and gave them a platform to voice divergent and convergent views on Nigeria's democracy. "The bottom-up approach is not so much a method, but a technique that allows for, and encourages, a people-centric approach to social science problems and a recognition of people as important" (Knott 2015: 12). Both approaches generated rich and relevant data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online between 1 February and 15 March 2022 with 21 Nigerian working-class women at different career levels. The use of WhatsApp video calls made it possible, safe, and quick to contact participants who may otherwise be difficult to reach. The cost-effectiveness and efficiency of video calls eliminated time, resource, and geographical constraints. Additionally, SSI allowed general-to-specific follow-up questions that may not be possible through surveys. The selection criteria were based on three indices: participants must be Nigerians, over 18 years of age, and earn less than 100,000 Naira (65 Euros) per month. Recruitment was through snowballing, a referral system in which one participant refers to another participant (Atkinson and Flint 2001; Vogt 1999). This system generated a good number of participants; ten of whom identified themselves as self-employed, eight, as civil servants, and three, as unemployed. Their academic qualifications varied noticeably: 11 held secondary school certificates while 6 were university graduates (three of

whom had master's degrees), but four had no formal education. Their marital status also varied: one was divorced, 13 were married, and seven identified as singles. In total, over 85 percent were middle-aged, that is, under 50. A lot of participants resided in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, and Edo while a few lived in Abuja, Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory (FTC). Each interview session lasted approximately 25 minutes.

To complement SSI, surveys were distributed between 1 March and 30 April 2022 to gather data from a larger number of participants, spread across a wider geographical space. The survey was designed to capture both qualitative and quantitative data to overcome shortcomings inherent in using only SSI. The quantitative section of the questionnaire focused on feminist politics and democracy, while the qualitative part encouraged participants to express opinions in their own words. Again, snowballing was used to recruit about one hundred low-income women that were sent a unique QR code generated through *Surveymonkey* (an electronic data-collecting tool). In total, 71 responded. They resided in Lagos, Ibadan, Abuja, Kano, Kwara, Ondo, Edo, Anambra, Delta, and Rivers states. A summary breakdown of respondents is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Breakdown of Survey Participant Bio-data

Age	18-30 (35)	31-50 (25)	51-65 (11)
Location	West (38)	East (25)	North (8)
Education	University (14)	Secondary (42)	Primary (15)
Occupation	Self-employed (22)	Employed (32)	Student (17)
Marital status	Married (19)	Single (40)	Divorced (12)

Source: Online survey questionnaire conducted in 2022

Table 1 presents the diverse age, location, education, occupation, and marital status of respondents. The 18 to 30-year olds constituted half of all participants while 60 of all 71 participants were under age 50. Only eight of the 71 participants are from the North while the rest resided in the South. Over 40 had secondary school certificates while another 54 identified as employed.

Strict ethical protocols were adhered to during SSI. Each participant was made aware of the study's purpose as well as the voluntariness of their participation. With their consent, each interview session began with

a confirmation of confidentiality and the reassurance of anonymity. All sessions were recorded with the express consent of participants. Thematic analysis was used to synthesize raw data. We followed strict analytical procedures: data was first transcribed, familiarized, summarized, and then coded. Thereafter, we linked them together under three broad themes: feminism, political representation, and democratic participation. For the surveys, a section on the purpose of the study, participants' consent, and the assurance of anonymity came first. The questions were direct with a portion that allowed participants to share their views in their own words. Similarly, the analysis of raw data followed strict procedures. While the quantitative generated a broad overview, qualitative interviews provided context and content. Together, the analysis was situated within the scope of the research objectives: low-income women's views on democracy, feminism, and feminist politics.

Analysis and Discussion

Nigeria's working-class women are diverse, outspoken, and opinionated. They engage with politics from a plethora of angles that reflect cultural and religious multiplicity and indicate complexity, dynamism, and fluidity. Their views on democracy, a woman's role in political leadership, and Nigerian feminism are broad and significantly shaped by an intersection of class, religion, and culture. This section presents an analysis of findings under three broad thematic clusters: feminism: contradictions and convergence; political representation and the role of women in government; and, finally, views on Nigeria's democracy and how to reform it. These constellations intersect to form a holistic yet nuanced understanding of women and politics. Below, we begin by delineating the differences between feminism and Nigeria's feminism from the perspective of participants before exploring feminist politics and democracy.

Feminism in Nigeria and Nigerian Feminism: Contradictions and Convergence

The term "feminism" among working-class, low-income Nigerian women is contested. It is not conceptualized as a conscious but decentralized movement established to promote, protect, and extend the interest of women politically, economically, and socially; rather, it is both conflated with LGBTQ (a culturally resisted idea) and understood as a Western import. The word "feminism" evoked comments such as "*advocate of sex change*," "*transgender*," "*reverse-gender*," "*gender reassignment*," "*un-natural*," "*men haters*," "*unattractive*, *unlovable and*

frustrated women" and "*enemies of tradition*." This misconception is not only problematic but speaks to the extent to which feminism as a concept is yet to be understood among low-income, working-class women. The overwhelming comment from both interviewed participants and surveyed respondents is that a feminist is an LGBTQ rights advocate.

A similar conflation is the supposition that women's liberation movement, a broad-based cluster of activities geared towards improving the lives of women, differs from feminism. In our participants' worldview, much of what they know of feminism is from Western origin. It is seen as a recent import, brought to Nigeria by international women agencies with the backing of Western powers. Its goal, they added, is to provide aid, challenge illiberal socio-cultural practices, push back on structural barriers that curtail women's liberty, and spread Western influence. Many of these goals, especially those that empower women, are well-received. "*They align with long-established local efforts to empower women*," *noted* a participant. Although not formally called feminism, these local efforts have a longer history. The point of opposition is the link between feminism and women's sexual rights, especially LGBTQ rights. For most participants, this is controversial and polarizing.

During the interviews, the study identified five conceptualizations of feminism. Firstly, allies of feminist ideologies, who choose not to identify as feminists, due to its incompatibility with their religious, moral, and cultural beliefs. According to a participant, "*I am not a feminist but I understand what freedom means to women. I am married with children and believe in traditional power structures in the home*." Secondly, others, who identify as feminists and champions of women's right to choose what they want. They, however, reject sexual liberalism on the grounds of religious and morally acceptable standards. They posit that this choice is a fundamental human right and that African women should be allowed to define feminism the way they want. A survey respondent noted that: "*As a feminist, men or society should not impose the extent to which a woman wants to pattern her life. If women are free, and I believe they are, men should not set a boundary*." Thirdly, some claim to be feminist but have a complementary view of men and women co-existing in society. According to a respondent, "*My feminism is not against men or intended to overthrow the traditional family structure in which men are providers and heads. Men and women are interdependent and can co-exist*." This and similar comments are neither radical nor passive but suggest that both sexes can cohabit by choice and not by force. A fourth strand identified at interviews are feminists who fully embraced the concept in its entirety, particularly the belief in multiple sexes, gender reassignment, and reverse gender roles. These minorities suffer marginalization

within society due to cultural and political pushbacks on LGBTQ ideals. According to an anonymous survey respondent, "*As a member of the LGBTQ community in Ibadan, I feel isolated and unprotected. Many feminists I know think sexuality is outside the scope of feminism*." The fifth and final category are those who reject feminism.

From the above, feminism among participants is broad-based but its LGBTQ component was stigmatized and antagonized. This disaffection, also common in public discourse, especially on radio, not only provoked disapproval of the feminism/LGBTQ intersection but also incited condemnation. Some participants claimed that LGBTQ has negative implications on marriage, childbearing, and traditional African family structures. They blamed it for homosexuality, sexual deviance, and unnatural relationships. It was argued that once an individual identifies as a feminist, they are automatically labelled as members of the LGBTQ community and mocked as gay-right defenders. According to a respondent, "*LGBTQ in Nigeria does not fully fit the peculiarities of the experiences of women living under the heavy influence of religion, patriarchy, tradition, and culture*." To another, it is also "too liberal, un-African, and not Nigerian-enough." A few more argued that LGBTQ is cancel culture, an attack on religious and traditional beliefs that perpetuates a Western agenda and America's cultural supremacy. In place of feminism, participants identified more with the women's liberation movement, though both concepts are significantly similar. According to them, the former is a common term for efforts to further the interests of women. Unlike feminism, which has a shorter history, women's liberation movements have deeper historical roots that date back to pre-colonial Nigeria. They encompass a broad gamut of activities that cut across geographical, economic, and social boundaries from activism against patriarchy to law reform and women empowerment efforts. The dissonance among participants between the two concepts – feminism and women's liberation – speaks to their exclusion from serious debates on Nigerian feminism.

While discourse on feminism may have expanded in academic literature and policy circles, not much of it, or put differently, not enough of it seems to be known among participants. This suggests that feminism in Nigeria is driven by well-educated, upper middle-class women, who assert a level of intellectual independence (like Chimamanda Adichie, a vocal Nigerian feminist whose activism is celebrated internationally) and are unafraid to stir controversy and debate on the role of Nigerian women in the twenty-first century. Although Nigerian feminists are not always visible in politics or corporate settings, they possess a convoluted worldview shaped by their Nigerianness and a digital presence that is universal and unrestrained by tradition-based ideologies.

Both online and off, they have championed and continue to advocate for women's rights by pushing for gender equality bills and challenging negative stereotypes. However, among working-class, interview participants, the overwhelming consensus is that Nigerian feminism is not inclusive, nor well-understood, and not grass-root-based. It is broadly perceived as radically too similar to its Western version to the extent that it is deemed too liberal and sexually perverse. Additionally, Nigerian feminists, according to participants, seem to operate with a class mindset, one that inadequately engages with and insufficiently integrates grassroots women. One interview participant said: "*They [middle-class women] do not represent our [working class] interests because they have more education, finance and social power. We are vulnerable and resentful.*" Feminists are therefore perceived as "*political and entitled.*"

Political Representation and the Role of Women in Government

The push for Affirmative Action and gender equality legislation did not resonate with working-class women participants in our study. A significant number of them were neither "keen" nor "interested" in increasing women's representation in top political positions. Over 71 percent of surveyed respondents and a third of interviewed participants did not consider it a priority.

Do women want equal political representation with men?

Fig. 1. Percentage summary of survey on equal political rights with men

In Figure 1 above, a significant majority of surveyed participants expressed indifference towards political equality. Four broad reasons were articulated. First, though most participants wanted more from politics – "*a fair space to thrive*, "better *economic opportunities*," "*improved access to* affordable higher *education*," "*upgraded social amenities*," "*security*," and tools to actualize their dreams – they did not say that more women in politics will achieve their needs. According to a participant, "*Gender is not the issue. What we require*

is the provision of basic life quintessential needed to survive. It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white, what matters is for it to catch the mouse." Others argued that evidence does not support the notion that more women in government would be a prerequisite for socio-economic development. Some even said that China experienced rapid industrial development in the past four decades with very few women in politics. Second, several interviewed participants noted that Nigeria's "*economic challenge is not about gender under-representation; it is an existential battle. Grinding poverty is a threat to all*." Another surveyed respondent said, "*Nigeria's underdevelopment is a consequence of political greed, unrestrained corruption, and tribalism. And it is not working*." In essence, the political system is not only fundamentally flawed but demands reforms that transcend increasing gender representation. Third, the few women in politics (whether elected or appointed) were described as part of the establishment and have done little to improve the lives of less-privileged, working-class women. A participant asserted that "*Most women in government are daughters, wives, families or close associates of male politicians. And as such, their allegiance is not to other women but to their party and political "god-fathers*." She continued that "*it is naïve to expect these women to help other women*." Finally, several others highlighted their preoccupation with the cost of living crisis and their daily struggles for survival. Most interviewed women argued that their lack of wherewithal and their daily exertions to improve their lives was more important than voting for rich and privileged women. "*It is more productive*," noted an interview participant, "*to work towards increasing my economic opportunities as a means to my ends*."

The perception that gender is not the issue, that poverty and bad governance impact both sexes, and that women in politics are only loyal to their parties and political god-fathers indicates significant indifference about voting for other women. While it is difficult to estimate how working-class women, in general, voted in previous elections, the current view among participants suggests that women in politics and those who campaign for offices are "*entitled, well-connected elites who are disconnected from the daily struggles of average women*." They are apathetic to, unaffected by, and indifferent to the concerns of ordinary women; thus, creating a "we" versus "them" narrative among participants. Although a few respondents want to see more women in politics, a larger majority questioned if the means justifies the end. The prevailing view is that the "*gender card will not win elections or garner significant public support. Governance should be about competence, not entitlement*." A deeper indifference towards more women representation

in politics may have been informed by their awareness of their political powerlessness. They expressed anger not only with their material deprivation and frustration but also with Nigeria's electoral mismanagement, noting that public votes do not matter. According to an interviewed participant, "… *our votes don't count. How can people like me make any difference in how politics is run in this nation? Elections are a box-ticking exercise*."

Most interview participants expressed a desire to see economic reforms with forward and backward linkages to the lives of women. However, many others expressed a determination to do more, both for themselves and their families, without allowing women in government to manipulate them using the gender card to divide and rule. For both interviewed and surveyed participants, focusing on themselves is the solution. "*The goal is to change or at least improve my current situation, waiting for politicians is a waste of economic time*" said a participant. However, others expressed traditional notions of men as political leaders, providers, decision-makers, and community leaders; and are keen to preserve existing social norms, practices, and customs that ranked men above women within domestic and political spaces. Here, men are seen as change agents through which women can improve their lives. Either way, participants did not articulate a desire to see more women in political leadership.

In sum, views on increasing women's political representation diverged into three categories: a significant majority (70%) expressed indifference, a minority few wanted it, while a smaller minority was undecided. The indifference was driven by frustration, powerlessness, and systemic corruption that largely disenfranchized working-class women.

Views on Nigeria's Democracy and How to Reform It

This section begins with an outline of findings from surveyed respondents. Specifically, it unpacks participants' expectations and compares these with their experience. Thereafter, we explore, through the lens of participants, systemic factors that limit the number of women in top decision-making political positions and how to fix it.

As indicated above under political representation, findings from surveyed participants on what women want in politics suggest that a large percent of respondents (41%) expressed interest in more economic opportunities, while 22% wanted justice for rape victims and women experiencing domestic violence. A further 20% wanted better quality health care, while

13% indicated interest in equal educational opportunities. Only (7%) expressed interest in quality family life. These expectations are consistent with findings on what the public expects from politics everywhere.

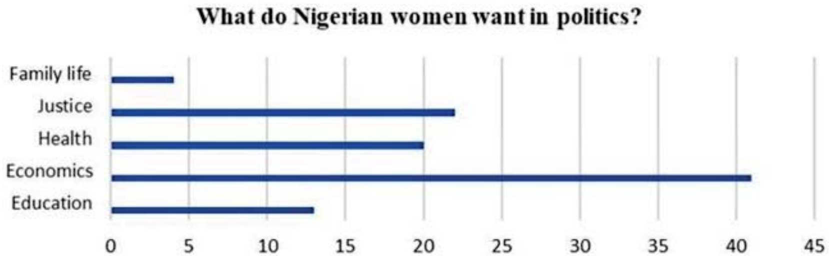

Fig. 2. Percentage summary of survey on what Nigerian women want in politics

However, these expectations are radically different from participants' experience. According to a respondent, "*The hope that democracy will improve my life is yet to materialize after 20 years of democratic rule. The sad reality is that things are not getting better!*" In the words of another respondent, "*…cost of living crisis, hike in fuel prices, policy failure, skyrocketing inflation, ethnic tension, naira devaluation, and growing youth unemployment have become significant barriers to peace and stability*." "*Too many issues of public concern are occurring all at once*" said another. To most participants, economic survival is currently of more importance than gender politics as they spoke to their own lived experiences – an embodiment of their realities as vulnerable human beings, lacking the means and resources to act for themselves. They talked about grinding poverty and the necessity of empowering themselves to meet their fundamental needs.

The economic deprivation of participants shaped their views of Nigeria's democracy. A significant majority expressed despair and disappointment, while a minority indicated hope and optimism. At the heart of this despair is poverty and unemployment fuelled by bad policies, bad politics, and bad systems. The core issue is the increasing concentration of executive, judicial, and political power in the hands of a minority few who also double as, or are in close alliance with media owners, corporate investors, and business elites. A large number of interviewed participants said democracy in Nigeria has become a means through which the power elite colonize the political space to further their economic empires through patronage, alliances, and connections. "*This so-called democracy*," noted

a participant, "*is necessary but insufficient for development to happen. It is controlled by big men*." Democracy may have stabilized the political terrain to the extent that a military takeover is no longer an imminent threat, however, it has become an apparatus through which a few people in power manipulate the system to their advantage and to the disadvantage of society. As a system, democracy in the Nigerian context is a tool used by the power elite to contest for power and resolve conflicts among different factions of the ruling class; for working-class women, however, democracy is "*government of rich men, for rich men, and by rich men, renewed during elections every four years*." What became apparent during interviews is that elections are how candidates and their parties use enormous financial resources to manipulate the system to get into political offices.

The present study has identified five democratic deficits in Nigeria. First, the nation's electoral system is overtly influenced by money politics on the one hand and the incumbent government on the other. For example, principal officers of the Commission, including its chair and resident commissioners, are appointed by the president. When appointments are politically motivated, as they often are, it culminates in institutional incompetence and corruption. Second, party finance lacks transparency and accountability, especially for campaign donations from corporate entities. This gives undue advantages to candidates with access to huge financial resources. Therefore, it is no surprise that only "wealthy politicians" can afford party nomination tickets and/or fund an efficient campaign operation. Third, contentious campaign rhetoric, laced with divisive half-truths in the media and on the campaign trail, stirs tensions and polarization. The mixed messages, according to participants, are not only confusing but leave them none the wiser. Fourth, the craftiness of politicians to pitch the electorates against each other, using religion, regional cleavages, and tribal politics is an enduring pattern. Religion is often politicized on the campaign trail to divide and exclude others. Muslim politicians warn fellow Muslims against voting for Christians and vice versa. Regional and ethnic differences are also exaggerated to discourage voting for candidates from other ethnic groups. Finally, money politics, evidenced by expensive campaign logistics, funds for grassroots mobilization, and exorbitant media spending influence voting outcomes. Although the 2021 Electoral Act attempted to address money in politics by substantially raising the spending limit of political parties before elections, it has had unintended consequences on the polity. For example, it raised the spending cap for presidential campaigns from 1 billion to 15 billion naira. This has inadvertently widened the gap between candidates,

who have means and those who do not. In the words of a participant, "*Essentially, the new electoral law will escalate the crisis of exclusion, which privileges older, wealthier people*." It will also put young candidates at a disadvantage, marginalize new political parties, and enable moneybags to manipulate the system.

Hopes that democracy allows the public to periodically elect best-fit candidates from political parties with pro-people ideologies and progressive plans have significantly declined. This is evidenced by participants' indifference and apathy towards politics in general and elections in particular. Nigeria's ruling class has perfected the system of weakening democratic institutions through corruption, money, and coercion. Hopes that elected politicians will act openly, accountably, and in the public interest have significantly declined. Trust in politics and politicians is in decline as well. Hopes that democratic institutions that provide social services, oversee public finances, and protect rule of law are also in decline. As ever, women and children bear most of the brunt of bad governance. According to a respondent, "*We will no longer be used as campaign tools to reach grassroots voters, and as vote mobilizers and supporters of corrupt politicians. We plan to improve our lives one woman at a time*."

On the positive side, the study found two grounds for hope. First is the emergence of politically-active, middle-aged interview participants who are no longer passive or docile on issues of public interest. Some of them, active on social media, claim to use multiple platforms to share information, engage in activism and express radical opinions. These minority few, in the 20-30s age group, were far apart geographically but are united by the consequences of bad governance and a determination to act. They claim to engage in bottom-up activism that includes but is not limited to calling out corrupt politicians, expose journalism, and public demonstrations, if required. A few of them said they took part in the EndSARS campaign in 2020 when the public outcry against police brutality and social injustice escalated into national demonstrations that drew international sympathy. According to a Lagos-based interview participant, "*Since the EndSARS protests, the momentum to make politics work for all Nigerians has increased. It is the dawn of a new political era*." While demonstrations are not new to Nigeria's politics, the issues that inspired the EndSARS protests and subsequent smaller ones are the novel manner through which social media and public demonstrations were organized. Most participants asserted that these actions exhibit a determination by young women (and men) to put dividing sentiments aside and commit to actions geared towards making

politics serve the public and not a minority. The second ground for hope is the 2021 *Not Too Young to Run* Act that reduced the age of political candidates and effectively relaxed Section 65 of the Nigerian Constitution; thus, making more young political aspirants eligible to run for offices in 2023 and subsequent elections. Although newcomers to politics face an uphill task, due to limited financial resources, a small national network, and untested party structures participants see the *Not Too Young to Run* Act as a victory.

The consensus is that, left on its own, Nigeria's democracy will not change except if some form of pressure is applied either by demonstration or opposition. Emphasis on the need to engage in the electoral process at all stages – registration of voters, election campaigns, voting and electronic transfer of the results to collating centres – was expressed repeatedly. A participant noted that the goal is to ensure a transparent electoral system through which credible candidates are voted into office. The hope is to widen systemic changes and influence pro-people policies that will increase economic opportunities for women, improve living standards, expand training opportunities in rural spaces, provide medical facilities, and enable better access to education – seen as the ladder out of poverty and intrinsically tied to the political economy of all women. No single approach was overwhelmingly dominant as participants' broad-ranging propositions connote variety, a multidimensional attitude that went beyond the constricted field of and focus on gender politics.

Conclusion

The move to increase women's visibility in top political positions in Nigeria is part of a growing call worldwide for more inclusive, diverse, and gender-fair politics. Using mixed methods, our article interrogated the intersection of feminism, feminist politics, and democracy through the lens of working-class, low-income women. Our study is premised on the notion that these women make up a significant number of Nigeria's voting population yet, their voices are muffled, underrepresented, and unheard. Findings indicate that Nigerian feminism is new and evolving. However, its evolution is steep in controversies, especially its link with LGBTQ. This notwithstanding, Nigerian feminism is a spectrum that incorporates many strands, including but not limited to women who fully embrace it at one end of the scale and those who totally reject it at the other end. Within the context of Nigeria's socio-religious, ethno-cultural, and

political peculiarities, a significant number of working-class women identified with some feminist ideals but resisted liberal sexuality.

As Nigerian feminism continues to evolve, its diffusion among low-income Nigerians will shape its long-term social impact. Women in politics are perceived as "*entitled, disconnected, and privileged*." Their loyalty is not to the plight of the average Nigerian woman but to their political parties and godfathers. Participants are therefore neither keen to nor interested in more gender representation in politics. Rather, aware of the enormity of their material deprivation, and conscious of patriarchy and institutionalized discrimination, they rejected well-worn divisive rhetorics that employ ethnic, gender, and religious sentiments but expressed a strong determination to improve their living standards. A larger percentage of participants take on a non-radical, non-confrontational worldview, informed by a reluctance to overthrow the existing status quo. They expressed an unwillingness to take sweeping political actions but chose to focus on addressing the horror of their material and financial deprivation. They spoke to their reality – one in which they see life as a struggle. Whether through their votes, social media advocacy, or a cluster of activisms, the goal remains economic and political reform. It is not enough for women to vote and be relegated to the background as passive observers during governance and policy-making. Nigeria's male-dominated political arena must address the concerns of working-class women.

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